The Blinded Hero: The Evolution of the Samson Stories

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THE BLINDED HERO:

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SAMSON STORIES

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by

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THE BLINDED HERO:

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Abstract

by

Mark Anthony Lackowski

In this dissertation, it will be argued that the Samson stories were gradually composed by scribes in concert with the broader textual developments of the book of Judges and the Deuteronomistic History (DH). It will be shown how the figure of Samson evolved from a border-crossing warrior clashing with Israel's enemies (Judg 14–15) to a tragic figure foreshadowing the downfall of Judah (Judg 16) to a demythologized Nazirite under the care and control of Yhwh (Judg 13). Furthermore, it will be argued that these supplemental developments in the Samson stories were a response, in part, to the shifting geopolitical and socioreligious landscapes affecting the kingdom of Judah during the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian periods. Yet rather than separate and read these layers in isolation from one another, this study will demonstrate how each major supplement—principally the addition of an ending (Judg 16) and then a beginning (Judg 13) to the literary core of the text (Judg 14–15)—reshaped the form and function of the entire composition. The diachronic investigation will therefore be in service to a synchronic reading of the text in its final forms.

This dissertation will attempt to overcome, then, some of the diachronic and synchronic issues often dividing biblical scholars working on the DH by reading the

different textual layers together, recognizing that the DH is a polyphonic corpus of literature. Lastly, by focusing on the evolution of the Samson stories and its relationship to the larger textual developments of the book of Judges and the DH, it will be shown how Samson is an integral part of both, functioning in many ways as a symbol of Israel itself, not only through his providential birth (cf. Israel's election) and strict religious vow to God (cf. Israel's covenant with Yhwh), but also in his pursuit of foreign women (cf. Israel's idolatry) and in doing what is evil rather than what is good in the eyes of Yhwh. In this way, Samson embodies both the story of Israel's deliverance and demise in his promising rise and tragic fall.

For Marshall John Lackowski (1937–2022),

the kindest and strongest man I have ever known,

who taught me how to pay attention to the scriptures.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
ABD	Freedman, David Noel. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
A.J.	Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae*
AHw	Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (3 vols.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowtiz, 1965–81.
ANEM	Ancient Near East Monographs
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Edited by James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAD	*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.* Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2006
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CurBR	Currents in Biblical Research
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
COS	*The Context of Scripture.* Edited by William W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew.* Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und literature des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by E. Kautzch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
Gilg.	The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999

VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WAW	Writings from the Ancient World
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WO	Die Welt des Orients
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Accordingly, I have been fortunate to study under and work with many fine scholars throughout my life, each of whom has shaped me in numerous ways. Yet few of them have been as generous, supportive, and thoughtful as Gary Knoppers. The quality of his scholarship was only exceeded by that of his character. Gary genuinely cared for the development of his students, not only professionally but also personally. There is much more that can be said about Gary and his dedication to his family, friends, and students. In short, he was a mensch in the truest sense of the word, and he laid the groundwork for this dissertation, for which I am tremendously grateful.

Lastly, and closer to home, I want to thank my incredible wife, Laura Donnelly, whose encouragement, patience, and resilience made it possible for me to finish this project, despite the various trials and tribulations that stood in our way. The commitment demonstrated in her own academic and professional work, and her love for our family inspired me to persevere, especially as we welcomed our firstborn son, Elliott Marshall, into the world. On that note, I have dedicated this dissertation to my late father, Marshall "Big Daddy" Lackowski, who not only showed me how to carefully pay attention to the text when reading the Bible—*nota bene*—but also that the greatest strength in life is exercised in the kindness and love shown to others.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE MAN OF MANY FACES

1.1. Introduction

Samson is one of the most colorful characters in the Bible. The richness of his story is not only evident in Judg 13–16, but in the vast reception history of Jews, Christians, and others alike.[1] The text has generated a panoply of interpretations, prompting scholars to differentiate the many faces of Samson.[2] A variety of theories for Samson's origin have emerged, ranging from a local hero of ancient Israelite folklore to a Hebrew Herakles invented by Jews in the Hellenistic period.[3] In the "book" of Judges,

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[1] For surveys of the reception history of Samson, see J. Cheryl Exum, "Why, Why, Why, Delilah?" in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, JSOTSup 215, Gender, Culture, Theory 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 175–237; David Fishelov, *Samson's Locks: The Transformations of Biblical Samson* (Tel Aviv: Haifa University Press, 2000); Cornelis Houtman and Klass Spronk, *Ein Held des Glaubens? Rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studien zu den Simson-Erzählungen*, CBET 39 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004); David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 170–230; Anthony C. Swindell, "Samson Surviving," in *Reworking the Bible – The Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 113–129; Kees Wisse, "Samson in Music," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 119–28; Karin Schöpflin, "Samson in European Literature: Some Examples from English, French and German Poetry," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 177–96; Klaas Spronk, "The Looks of a Hero: Some Aspects of Samson in Fine Arts," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 197–210; and Reinhold Zwick, "Obessive Love: Samson and Delilah Go to the Movies," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 101–235; Caroline Blyth, *Reimagining Delilah's Afterlives as Femme Fatale – The Lost Seduction*, LHBOTS 652 (London: T&T Clark, 2017); and Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, *Black Samson: The Untold Story of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] See J. Cheryl Exum, "The Many Faces of Samson," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 13–31.

[3] For folkloric readings of the Samson stories, see Hermann Gunkel, "Simpson," in *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 38–64; Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 608–24; David E. Bynum, "Samson as a Biblical φὴρ ὀρεσκῷς," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch, SBL Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 57–73; and Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, LHBOTS 453 (London: T&T Clark, 2006). For Hellenistic readings of the Samson stories, see Claudia Nauerth, "Simsons Taten. Motivgeschichtliche Überlegungen,"

Samson is the last of twelve שפטים ("chieftains/deliverers/judges"), charismatic tribal

leaders raised up by God one by one to deliver Israel from the hands of her enemies.[4]

However, many scholars find Samson to be an anomaly among the judges and difficult to

situate within the book.[5] From his miraculous birth and tragic death to his lack of

leadership and wanton behavior, Samson appears to be an abject failure, both as a judge

and as a Nazirite appointed by God.[6] Scholars are also divided on whether to read the

DBAT 21 (1985): 94–120; Othniel Margalith, "Samson's Foxes," *VT* 35 (1985): 224–29; idem, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks," *VT* 36 (1986): 225–34; idem, "More Samson Legends," *VT* 36 (1986): 397–405; idem, "The Legends of Samson/Heracles," *VT* 37 (1987): 63–70; Diana V. Edelman, "Remembering Samson in a Hellenized Context (Judges 13–16)," in *Leadership, Social Memory, and Judean Discourse in the Fifth-Second Centuries BCE*, ed. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2016), 231–47; and Robert Gnuse, "Samson and Heracles Revisited," *SJOT* 32.1 (2018): 1–19.

[4] The use of the word 'book' here and elsewhere is anachronistic, since books and book culture only arose from the Hellenistic period onward with the advent of the codex, increased literacy, and the spread of libraries and schools in Hellenistic and (later) Roman provinces. Instead, the anthology of texts (primarily scrolls) that constitute the Bible are the products of scribal traditions that composed, copied, and studied these texts over extended periods of time. Thus, Karel van der Toorn, borrowing a term coined by A. Leo Oppenheim, prefers "streams of tradition" rather than books. See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9–26.

There is difficulty in consistently translating שפט in the book of Judges (and elsewhere), since the שפטים often act in such disparate ways and rarely exercise judicial functions. In general, the verb שפט denotes an act of ruling or the exercise of authority, with further differentiation depending on the context, whereas in the book of Judges the שפט functions primarily, although not exclusively, as a charismatic leader or warrior who delivers Israel from her enemies. For more on שפט, the שפטים, and their cognates in neighboring cultures and languages (e.g., Ugarit and Mari), see H. Niehr, "שָׁפַט *šāpat*; שֹׁפֵט *šōpēt*," *TDOT* XV:411–30; Temba L. J. Mafico, *Yahweh's Emergence as "Judge" among the Gods: A Study of the Hebrew Root špṭ* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2007); and Julian Chike, *Mari and the Bible: A Link to the Past? The Case of Šāpiṭum and Šōpēṭ Reconsidered* (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2022).

[5] See the following comments by George F. Moore: "The adventures of Samson differ markedly from the exploits of the judges in the preceding chapters of the book. Ehud, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah were leaders, who, at the head of their tribesmen, 'turned to flight the armies of the aliens,' and delivered their countrymen. Samson is a solitary hero, endowed with prodigious strength, who in his own quarrel, single-handed, makes havoc among the Philistines, but in no way appears as the champion or deliverer of Israel. It is easy to see why he should have been a favourite figure of Israelite folk-story, the drastic humour of which is strongly impressed upon the narrative of his adventures; but not so easy to see what place he has in the religious pragmatism of the Deuteronomic Book of Judges, or, indeed, in what sense he can be called a judge at all." George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, ICC 7 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 313.

[6] See David Monaco, C.P., "Samson: The Anti-Judge," *JJT* 23 (2016): 46–55.

Samson stories as a composite or unified work, often marshalling the same textual evidence in favor of their diachronic and synchronic readings.[7] These conflicting interpretations of Samson extend beyond his precarious role in the book of Judges when considering how the stories fit within larger biblical contexts, such as what Jews call the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), Christians the Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther), and biblical scholars the DH (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings).[8]

This dissertation will argue that the Samson stories were composed gradually by scribes in concert with the broader textual developments of the book of Judges and the DH. It will be shown how the figure of Samson evolved from a border-crossing warrior clashing with Israel's enemies (Judg 14–15) to a tragic figure foreshadowing the downfall of Judah (Judg 16) to a demythologized Nazirite under the care and control of Yhwh (Judg 13). Furthermore, it will be argued that these supplemental developments in the Samson stories were a response, in part, to the shifting geopolitical and socioreligious landscapes affecting Judah during the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian periods.[9]

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[7] See Jichan Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 1–114; Louis C. Jonker, *Exclusivity and Variety – Perspectives on Multidimensional Exegesis*, CBET 19 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 81–269; and Thomas Meurer, *Die Simson-Erzählungen – Studien zu Komposition und Entstehung, Erzähltechnik und Theologie von Ri 13–16*, BBB 130 (Berlin-Wien: Philo, 2001).

[8] See Richard D. Nelson, "The Former Prophets and Historiography" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. Stephen B. Chapman and Marvin A. Sweeney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 215–32; Steven L. McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1–24; and Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History – A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

[9] For an introduction to the historical, literary, religious, and social issues affecting Judah during these periods, see the essays in Lester L. Grabbe, ed., *Good Kings and Bad Kings: The Kingdom of Judah in the Seventh Century BCE*, LHBOTS 393 (London: T&T Clark, 2005); Filip Čapek and Oded Lipschits,

Yet, rather than simply separate and read these hypothetical layers in isolation from one another, this study will demonstrate how each major supplement—principally the addition of an ending (Judg 16) and then a beginning (Judg 13) to the literary core of the text (Judg 14–15)—reshaped the form and function of the whole composition.[10] The diachronic investigation will therefore be in service of a synchronic reading of the text in its final forms and draw upon early Jewish interpretations of Samson by Josephus and Pseudo-Philo to bolster its claims.[11] In so doing, this project will attempt to overcome some of the diachronic and synchronic issues often dividing biblical scholars working on texts in the DH by reading the different textual layers together, recognizing that the DH is a polyphonic corpus of literature.[12] Lastly, by focusing on the evolution of the Samson

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eds., *The Last Century in the History of Judah: The Seventh Century BCE in Archaeological, Historical, and Biblical Perspectives*, AIL 37 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019); Oded Lipschitz and Joseph Blenkinsopp, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003); and Oded Lipschitz and Manfred Oeming, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

[10] For similar textual reconstructions, see Hartmut Gese, "Die ältere Simsonüberlieferung (Richter c. 14–15)," *ZTK* 82 (1985): 261–80; Markus Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam – Redaktionsgeschichtliche Beobacktungen zu Jdc 13–16," *ZAW* 112.4 (2000): 526–49; and Marc Z. Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, OTR (London: Routledge, 2002), 40–60. For more on scribal additions to the beginning and ending of ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts, see Sara J. Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[11] For an introduction and commentary on Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, see Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo – Rewriting the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, AGJU 31 (Leiden: Brill, 1996). For an introduction and commentary on Pseudo-Philo's *On Samson*, see Gohar Muradyan and Aram Topchyan, "*Pseudo-Philo*, *On Samson* and *On Jonah*," in *Outside the Bible – Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. Louis H. Feldman et al. (Philadelphia: JPS, 2013), 1:750–803. For an introduction and commentary on the Samson stories in Josephus' *Judean Antiquities*, see Christopher T. Begg, *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary,* vol. 4, Judean Antiquities 5–7, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 68–79. For an in-depth study of Josephus' reading of the Samson stories, see Louis Feldman, "Josephus' Version of Samson," *JSJ* 19 (1988): 171–214; Mark Roncace, "Another Portrait of Josephus' Portrait of Samson," *JSJ* 35 (2004):185–207; and Tessel M. Jonquiere, "Of Valour and Strength: The Samson Cycle in Josephus' work: *Jewish Antiquities* 5.276–317," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 119–28.

stories and its relationship to the larger textual development of the book of Judges and the

DH, it will be shown how Samson is an integral part of both, functioning in many ways

as a symbol of Israel itself, not only through his providential birth (cf. Israel's election)

and strict religious vow to God (cf. Israel's covenant with Yhwh), but in his pursuit of

foreign women (cf. Israel's idolatry) and in doing what is evil (cf. Israel in Judg 2:11;

3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1) rather than what is good in the eyes of Yhwh (Deut 6:18).[13]

In this way, Samson embodies both the story of Israel's deliverance (*Heilsgeschichte*)

and demise (*Unheilsgeschichte*) in his promising rise and tragic fall.[14]

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[12] For an overview of the scholarly debate between diachronic and synchronic readings of Judges, see Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges – An Inductive, Rhetorical Study*, VTsup 111 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1–26 [esp. 9–10]. The language of polyphony is drawn from the work of the Russian literary critic and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose influential works on literary theory and the modern novel have been adapted by biblical scholars over the last forty years. For more, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*, SemeiaSt 38 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000); and idem, "Bakhtin and the Bible: A Select Bibliography," *PRSt* 32 (2005): 339–45.

[13] For readings of Samson symbolizing Israel, see Edward L. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 237–60; and Amanda Beckenstein Mbuvi, "Samson's Body Politic," *BibInterp* 20 (2012): 389–406.

[14] The use here of "*Heilsgeschichte*" (salvation history) and "*Unheilsgeschichte*" (history of calamity) reflects the language of scholars who argue for a grand history of Israel from creation to exile in the form of an Enneateuch (Gen–Kgs). See, for example, the following comments by Jan Christian Gertz: "Within this story, a basic separation into two parts can be clearly noticed (even though each part contains aspects of the other as well): The theme of the books of Genesis-Joshua is salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*), which displays the normative ideal time of the relationship between God and nation. The theme of the books Judg.-2 Kgs is the history of calamity (*Unheilsgeschichte*) which leads to the loss of land and state. The unity of Genesis-2 Kings and the portrayal of the history of the people of Israel from the creation of the world until the Babylonian exile results not only from the chronological order and the generally coherent thematic treatment. There are also a number of redactional connections which, while not stretching through the whole work, bind together and structure individual compositions or link neighbouring compositions." Jan Christian Gertz, "The Literature of the Old Testament: Torah and Former Prophets," in *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Literature, Religion and History of the Old Testament*, ed. J. C. Gertz et al. (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 242. For more, see the collection of essays in Thomas B. Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, eds., *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch?: Identifying Literary Works in Genesis Through Kings*, AIL (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011).

1.2. History of Scholarship

The amount of critical scholarship on Samson is immense and includes a proliferation of work by biblical scholars who have written extensively on the exploits of Israel's infamous strongman from a wide variety of perspectives.[15] This prodigious output has been met with equal fervor by scholars working on the book of Judges as a whole, providing interpreters with an abundance of information and analysis.[16] Two common problems identified throughout much of this research include scholars' struggle

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[15] Major monographs on Samson include the following, W. A. Scott, *The Giant Judge or the Story of Samson, The Hebrew Hercules* (San Francisco: Whitton, Towne & Co., Printers and Publishers, 1858); V. Zapletal, O. P., *Der biblische Samson* (Freiburg: Universitäts-Buchhandlung O. Gschwend, 1906); Paul Carus, *The Story of Samson and its Place in the Religious Development of Mankind* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1907); Hermann Stahn, *Die Simsonsage. Eine religionsgeschichtliche untersuchung über richter 13-16* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1908); Abram Smythe Palmer, *The Samson-Saga and its Place in Comparative Religion* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1913); James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978); Yair Zakovitch, *The Life of Samson (Judges 13–16): A Critical Literary Analysis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982); Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*; Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*; and Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man – The Story of Samson (Judges 13–16)* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2006). For an extensive overview of 19th and 20th century scholarship on Samson, see Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 1–114.

[16] For major commentaries in English, French, and German, see Gottlieb Ludwig Studer, *Das buch der Richter: Grammatisch und historisch erklärt*, 2nd ed. (Bern: Dalp, 1842); Ernst Bertheau, *Das Buch Der Richter und Ruth*, 2nd ed., KEH 6 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1883); Karl D. Budde, *Die Bucher Richter und Samuel, ihre Quellen und ihr Aufbau* (Giessen: J. Ricker, 1890); Marie-Joseph Legrange, O. P., *Le Livre Des Judges* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1903); Moore, *A Critical*; Charles F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (London: Rivingston, 1918); Robert G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, AB 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975); J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); Victor H. Matthews, *Judges & Ruth*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gunn, *Judges*; Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Walter Groß, *Richter*, HThKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2009); Trent Butler, *Judges*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009); Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013); Serge Frolov, *Judges*, FOTL 6B (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 6D (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Ernst Knauf, *Richter*, ZBK 7 (Zurich: TVZ, 2016); Richard D. Nelson, *Judges: A Critical and Rhetorical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2017); Mercedes L García Bachmann, *Judges*, Wisdom Commentary 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018); and Klaas Spronk, *Judges*, HCOT (Leuven: Peters, 2019); and Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judges I: A Commentary on Judges 1:1–10:5*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2021). For an overview of some of the other major works on the book of Judges over the last 30 years, see Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., "Judges in Recent Research," *CBR* 1 (2003): 159–85; and Kelly J. Murphy, "Judges in Recent Research," *CBR* 15 (2017): 179–213.

to track the compositional history of the book of Judges and to locate the Samson stories in that textual development. These challenges are compounded by the fact that interpreters often find it difficult to fit Samson into their literary and historical schemas. Thus, a variety of theories have been proposed for situating Samson within the book of the Judges. For the purposes of this investigation, scholarship pertaining to the textual development of the Samson stories will be the primary focus of the review, especially form, tradition, and redaction criticism, although other interpretive methodologies related to the evolution of the text will be considered where appropriate.

Many nineteenth-century interpreters read the Samson stories as mythic literature, particularly as an Israelite solar myth, often drawing comparisons between Samson and Herakles, or his earlier Phoenician counterpart, Melqart.[17] The similarities between Samson and Herakles are enticing, since both have semidivine births; both are marked by supernatural strength; both begin their careers wrestling a lion; both are apt at breaking bonds; both are subdued by cunning women; and both suffer tragic deaths by their own hands.[18] Moreover, Samson's close proximity and frequent entanglements with the Philistines, members of the "Sea Peoples" whose origins ultimately derive from across the Mediterranean, provides a possible point of contact between ancient Aegean and Israelite culture.[19] However, the extent to which biblical texts involving the Philistines

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[17] For a bibliography and review of this 19th century scholarship, see Moore, *A Critical*, 364–65. For a more contemporary review of the literature, see Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 1–114; and Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*, 5–16. For more on the cultic and mythical background of Melqart, see Corinne Bonnet, *Melqart: cultes et mythes de l'Héraclès tyrien en Méditerranée*, Studia Phoenicia 8 (Leuven: Peeters, 1988).

[18] For more detailed comparisons, see Edelman, "Remembering Samson."

[19] For more on the origin of the Philistines, see Assaf Yasur-Landau, *The Philistines and Aegean Migration at the End of the Late Bronze Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Ann E. Killebrew

reflect authentic historical memories of Philistia in the late-second millennium is contested.[20] Nevertheless, the comparisons between Samson and Herakles persist today, seen, for example, in the work of Yair Zakovitch (1982; 2005), Claudia Nauerth (1985), Othniel Margalith (1985; 1986; 1987), Klaas Spronk (2010), and Diana Edelman (2016).[21] But the closer one looks at the details of these mythic texts and the Samson stories the more pronounced the differences become, especially when scholars do not first situate Samson within his ancient Israelite and near Eastern contexts.[22] Hence, as George Foot Moore noted long ago in his own work on the book of Judges (1895), the Samson "legend, which is very old, has its roots in the earth, not in the sky."[23] For these reasons, among others, at the beginning of the twentieth century, many biblical scholars turned their gaze from the West to the East for better historical and literary comparisons to the figure of Samson.

Accordingly, the biblical commentary by Charles Burney (1918) on the book of Judges was a significant piece of scholarship that thoroughly situated the book within the

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and Gunnar Lehmann, *The Philistines and Other "Sea Peoples" in Text and Archeology*, ABS 15 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013); and Peter M. Fischer and Teresa Bürge, eds., *"Sea Peoples" Up-To-Date: New Research on Transformations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 13th–11th Centuries BCE*, Contributions to the Chronology of the Eastern Mediterranean 35 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017).

[20] See, for example, Israel Finkelstein, "The Philistines in the Bible: A Late-Monarchic Perspective," *JSOT* 27 (2002): 131–67.

[21] Zakovitch, *The Life of Samson*; idem, "The Strange Biography of Samson," in *From Bible to Midrash: Portrayals and Interpretive Practices*, ed. H. Trautner-Kromann (Lund: Arcus, 2005), 19–36; Nauerth, "Simsons Taten"; Margalith, "Samson's Foxes"; idem, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks"; idem, "More Samson Legends"; idem, "Legends of Samson/Heracles"; Klaas Spronk, "The Book of Judges as a Late Construct," in *Historiography and Identity (re)formulation in Second Temple Historiographical Literature* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 15–28; and Edelman, "Remembering Samson."

[22] See, for example, the critiques of Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*, 7–12.

[23] Moore, *A Critical*, 365.

world of the ancient Near East. That approach is on full display when Burney offers an

extended comparison between Samson and Gilgamesh.[24] There Burney argues that

Samson and Gilgamesh have multiple traits in common with the Babylonian sun god of

justice, Shamash, with whom Samson shares, among other things, a similar name (שמשון)

and an affinity for fire (cf. Judg 13:20; 14:15; 15:4–6, 14; 16:9).[25] Similarly, Hermann

Gunkel, a contemporary of Burney, also innovated the study of Samson through his form-

critical methodology by exploring the folkloric *Sitz im Leben* behind the Samson stories.

In his essay, "Simson," Gunkel (1913) argued that one of the fundamental themes in the

story was the opposition between nature and culture, in which Samson represented the

Israelite *Naturmensch* ("natural man") over against the Philistine *Kulturmenschen*

("cultural men"). As the natural man, Samson battled beasts with his bare hands (Judg

14:6), ate wild honey from animal carcasses (Judg 14:8–9), fought with unorthodox

weapons found in nature (Judg 15:4–5, 15–16), lived in the cleft of a rock (Judg 15:8–

13), and drew strength from his untamed and untouched hair (Judg 13:5; 16:14, 17, 22).

All these activities were juxtaposed with the cultured practices of the Philistines, who

resided in cities (Judg 14:9; 16:1), performed extensive agrarian activities (Judg 14:5;

15:5), used manmade instruments of war (Judg 14:19; 16:21), and constructed impressive

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[24] Burney, *Book of Judges*, 391–408.

[25] As Burney notes, "The *name* Samson or Šimšon, connected as it doubtless is with Heb. *Šémeš* 'sun', has of course been adduced as an argument for the theory of the solar myth…[and] it can hardly be denied that the name must have been in origin *honorific* of the sun, and so must indicate the existence of sun-worship in the locality—a fact which is indeed attested by the place-name Beth-shemesh, 'Temple of the Sun', in the immediate neighborhood of the scene of the hero's exploits." Burney, *Book of Judges*, 391–92. For a recent archaeological treatment of Beth-shemesh, see Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw': Tel Beth-Shemesh and the Sorek Valley in the Iron Age," in *The Shephelah During the Iron Age: Recent Archaeological Studies*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Aren M. Maeir (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 27–43.

temple structures (Judg 16:23–27). Gunkel's development of these motifs was significant, and his work remains influential to this day, seen especially in the comparative work of Susan Niditch (1993; 2008) on the folklore hero and trickster and Gregory Mobley (1997; 2006) on the ancient Near Eastern "wild man" (*laḥmu*).[26]

In addition to Gunkel's exploration of the oral history behind the Samson stories, other scholars attempted to reconstruct the textual history behind the book of Judges while largely avoiding the types of source critical analysis done by many nineteenth century scholars.[27] The most influential person behind this approach was Martin Noth (1943), who established the DH in his *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, positing a single literary work behind the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings that shares a common language, style, content, and theological *Tendenz*.[28] Noth argued that the DH was composed by an individual author, the Deuteronomist (Dtr), in Mizpah during the exilic period shortly after the release of Jehoiachin by the king of Babylon, Amel-Marduk, in 562 BCE (2 Kgs 25:27–30).[29] According to Noth, the Dtr

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[26] Gregory Mobley, "The Wild Man in the Bible and the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 116 (1997): 217–33; idem, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*; and Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero"; and idem, '*My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man': Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63–80.

[27] Drawing upon the work of Pentateuchal criticism, most 19th century scholars posited some combination of J, E, and D as the primary sources underlying the book of Judges. For an overview of these views, see Moore, *A Critical*, XIX–XXXVII. Source critical readings of the Samson Saga continued well into the 20th century. For example, see Cuthbert Aikman Simpson, *The Composition of the Book of Judges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957). For a review of that scholarship, see Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 1–34.

[28] Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, trans J. Doull, 2nd ed., JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991). For an overview of the DH according to Noth, see Antony F. Campbell, SJ, "Martin Noth and the Deuteronomistic History," in *The History of Israel's Traditions – The Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 31–62.

[29] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 27.

created the period of the judges and placed it between the final speeches of Joshua (Josh

23) and Samuel (1 Sam 12) to serve as a transition for Israel from the conquest of the

land to the emergence of the monarchy.[30] The judges period was primarily a combination

of two textual traditions: a collection of legendary stories about the tribal heroes of Israel

(Judg 3–12) and a list of minor judges with limited information detailing their lives and

rule (Judg 10:1–5; 12:8–15).[31] Jephthah belonged to both traditions (Judg 11:1–12:6;

12:7) and became the lynchpin for the Dtr who brought them together under the guise of

the "judges."[32] Noth was unable to confidently situate Samson within the DH because he

was not among the judges listed in Samuel's farewell address to Israel (1 Sam 12:11) and

because Noth thought that the Samson stories did not show any signs of having been

worked on by the Dtr.[33] Noth's ambiguous judgment about Samson was likely due to his

narrow view of the Dtr as an individual mastermind who singlehandedly compiled,

composed, and edited the tragic history of Israel and Judah.[34] While Noth acknowledged

the heterogeneous nature of the traditional material used by the Deuteronomist, especially

in the period of the judges, he could not account for the seemingly disparate sources

underlying the Samson story, which he thought was "made up of a series of loosely

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[30] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 69. For an overview of Judges in the DH, see Mark A. O'Brien, "Judges and the Deuteronomistic History," in *The History of Israel's Traditions – The Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 235–59.

[31] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 69–72.

[32] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 70–71.

[33] Noth, *Deuteronomistic*, 84–85. The name of Samson, however, is included in LXX[L] and in Syriac.

[34] Noth portrays the Dtr as an individual author, editor, and historian, who drew upon Israelite and Judahite sources and traditions to compose a grand historical account. Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 26, 128, 145.

connected separate stories, each of which is self-contained."[35] Moreover, Noth could not

adequately explain Samson's partial deliverance of the Israelites from the Philistines

(Judg 13:5; cf. Judg 10:18), which was only fully accomplished under the leadership of

the judge and prophet Samuel (1 Sam 7:7–15).[36] For these reasons, Noth inferred that

Judg 13:1 originally introduced the stories of Samuel (1 Sam 1:1ff) and not Samson (Judg

13:2–16:31).[37]

Following Noth, the most influential work on the textual development of the book

of Judges came from Wolfgang Richter (1963; 1964), whose proposed *Retterbuch*

("Book of Saviors")—according to him, a pre-Deuteronomistic, northern Israelite core to

the book of Judges (Judg 3–9)—did not include Jephthah or Samson.[38] Instead, Richter

argued that the Samson stories developed independently and were only incorporated into

the book of Judges by the Dtr during the exile.[39] Many scholars have followed in

Richter's footsteps, arguing that the Samson stories contain few Deuteronomistic features

and were composed apart from the *Retterbuch*, some even postulating that they were not

incorporated into the book of Judges until the Hellenistic period.[40]

Robert Boling (1975), on the other hand, posited three main redactional layers in

the book of Judges: an eighth-century "pragmatic" phase (Judg 2:6–15:20), a seventh

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[35] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 69–70 (n. 1).

[36] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 39.

[37] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 39–40, 84–85.

[38] Wolfgang Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch*, BBB 18 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1963), 339–40.

[39] Wolfgang Richter, *Die Bearbeitungen des "Retterbuches" in der deuteronomischen Epoche*, BBB 21 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1964), 61, 74, 117.

[40] See, for example, Römer, *So-Called*, 138.

century "Deuteronomic" phase (Judg 2:1–5, 6:7–10, 10:6–16, 16:1–18:31), and an exilic sixth century "Deuteronomistic" phase (1:1–36 and 19:1–21:25).[41] According to Boling, the Samson stories were split into two halves, the first narrating Samson's "rise as judge" (Judg 13–15) and the second narrating his "tragic end" (Judg 16). Boling argued that both halves were *pre*-exilic and tightly bound to the rest of the book, each driven by the Deuteronomic desire to encourage dependence on Yhwh alone—something Boling thought Samson realized in his prayers to God (Judg 15:18; 16:28).[42]

Alberto Soggin (1981) understood Samson "as a judge only in a manner of speaking."[43] Similarly to Noth, Soggin argued that all of the chapters of the Samson stories (Judg 13–16) were independent units that did not presuppose the others, but rather were artfully brought together in a Deuteronomistic framework.[44] Soggin followed Richter in positing Samson's birth narrative (Judg 13) as an amalgam of older traditions revolving around the hero's nativity.[45]

Like Soggin, Hartmut Gese (1985) also divided the Samson stories into four units, but he did so in a slightly different fashion (Judg 13; 14–15; 16:1–3; and 16:4–31).[46] According to Gese, the literary core of the Samson stories is Judg 14–15, which he argues is "eine ältere Simsonüberlieferung" because it does not presuppose the Nazirite vow in

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[41] Boling, *Judges*, 30.

[42] ibid., 252–53. For more on the role of prayer in the Samson stories, see J. Cheryl Exum, "The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga," *VT* 33 (1983): 30–45.

[43] Soggin, *Judges*, 228.

[44] ibid., 228–31.

[45] ibid., 230.

[46] Gese, "ältere," 263–64.

Judg 13 and because it serves as the basis for Judg 16:4–31, with which it shares numerous parallels.[47] Like many other interpreters, Gese has difficulty situating Judg 16:1–3 within the broader textual development of the Samson stories and concludes that this brief episode of Samson with the sexworker (זנה) and the men of Gaza is "einer eigentümlichen Variante."[48]

Yairah Amit (1992), who undertook a comprehensive study of the compositional strategy employed in the book of Judges, broke the Samson cycle up into three periods: Samson's birth (Judg 13), marriage (Judg 14–15), and last days (Judg 16).[49] While Amit acknowledges the perceived tensions in the text, which many scholars point to as signs of diachronic development, she interprets these tensions synchronically as "the tendencies of its author […] to construct, at the end of the book, a figure of a judge who, at one and the same time, justifies disappointment in the leadership of the judges and explains the significance of the effect of deliverance."[50] Furthermore, Amit interprets these tensions in the text as intentionally employed by a single, pre-exilic author seeking to justify Israel's transition from the failed period of the judges to the rule of the monarchy.[51]

This brief survey of some of the nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship on the textual development of the Samson stories demonstrates that there are a variety of

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[47] ibid., 263. For more on the literary parallels between Judg 14–15 and Judg 16, see J. Cheryl Exum, "Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga," *JSOT* 19 (1981): 3–29.

[48] ibid., 263.

[49] Amit, *Book of Judges*, 267–75.

[50] ibid., 308.

[51] ibid., 307.

diachronic interpretations of the text, in addition to many synchronic approaches.[52]

Nevertheless, most of the scholarship on Samson can be divided into three primary

approaches drawn from the work of Paul Ricœur.[53] The first, which was reviewed above,

is concerned with *the world behind the text*, exploring the relationship of the Samson

stories to their ancient Israelite and near Eastern contexts and the diachronic development

of the stories at the hands of scribes. The second is concerned with *the world inside of the*

text, which addresses how the final form of the Samson story is represented as a carefully

structured and coherent work of biblical literature.[54] The third is concerned with *the*

world in front of the text, which interrogates the ways in which readers have interpreted

or failed to interpret the text in light of the perspectives primarily raised by feminist

criticism.[55] Each of these approaches to the text continues in a variety of ways throughout

much of the current scholarship on the Samson stories, although with several new

developments.

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[52] For a more extensive review of the diachronic scholarship on the Samson stories, see Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 1–92; and Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 190–332.

[53] Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976), 87–94.

[54] See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Style in Judges 13–16," *JBL* 82 (1963): 65–76; James L. Crenshaw, *Samson*; Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry,"; Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; and Robert Alter, "Samson Without Folklore," in *Text and Tradition. The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 47–56; and Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*.

[55] See Mieke Bal, "Delilah Decomposed: Samson's Talking Cure and the Rhetoric of Subjectivity," in *Lethal Love – Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 37–67; idem, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988); J. Cheryl Exum, "Samson's Women," in *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, JSOT 163 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 61–93; Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," *JSOT* 55 (1992): 25–37; Carol Smith, "Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?" *JSOT* 76 (1997): 45–57; and Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, ABRL (New York: Double Day, 1998), 181–252.

1.3. State of the Question

The popularity of the Samson stories has not waned in the twenty-first century.

Instead, a profusion of scholarship has been produced over the last twenty years, much of

which has either returned full circle to the types of questions posed in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century or undertaken innovative approaches to the reception history

of the text. The former is represented by those interested in the ancient contexts from

which the Samson stories emerged—whether near Eastern or Hellenistic—and the textual

development of the stories themselves.[56] The latter explore the countless ways the

Samson stories have been read and used in their reception history and how issues of

gender and sexuality are construed within the text.[57] For the purposes of this study,

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[56] For near Eastern contexts, see Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*; Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*; idem, *The Empty Men – The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 171–207; Niditch, *Judges*, 138–72; idem, "Samson"; and Robin Baker, *Hollow Men, Strange Women – Riddles, Codes and Otherness in the Book of Judges*, BibInt 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2016). For Hellenistic contexts, see Spronk, "Book of Judges,"; and Edelman, "Remembering Samson." For the diachronic development of the Samson stories, see Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam"; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 190–332; Brettler, *Book of Judges*; Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah – The Judges*, JSOTSup 385 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 155–97; Groß, *Richter*, 89–90, 657–60; Frolov, *Judges*, 251–76; and Knauf, *Richter*, 16–17, 23–25.

[57] For reception criticism, see Exum, "Why, Why, Why"; Fishelov, *Samson's Locks*; Houtman and Spronk, *Ein Held des Glaubens?*; Gunn, *Judges*, 170–230; Swindell, "Samson Surviving"; Wisse, "Samson in Music"; Schöpflin, "Samson in European Literature"; Spronk, "Looks of a Hero"; Zwick, "Obessive Love"; Blyth, *Reimagining Delilah's Afterlives*"; and Junior and Schipper, *Black Samson*.

For gender criticism, see Susan Ackerman, "What if Judges had been Written by a Philistine?" *BibInterp* 8 (2000): 33–41; Claudia V. Camp, "Riddlers, Tricksters and Strange Women in the Samson Story," in *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the* Bible, JSOTSup 320 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 94–143; Lori Rowlett, "Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah," in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone, JSOTSup 334 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 106–15; Ela Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, "Samson: Masculinity Lost (and Regained?)," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creana, Bible in the Modern World 33 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 171–88; Stephen M. Wilson, "Samson the Man-Child: Failing to Come of Age in the Deuteronomistic History," *JBL* 133 (2014): 43–60; Marco Derks, "'If I Be Shaven, Then My Strength Will Go from Me' – A Queer Reading of the Samson Narrative," *BI* 23 (2015): 553–73; Amy Kalmanofsky, "Manoah, Manoah's Wife, Samson, and Delilah," in *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible – The Ways the Bible Challenges Its Gender Norms* (London: Routledge: 2016), 68–94; and Mark Lackowski, "Victim, Victor, or Villain: The Unfinalizability of Delilah," *JBR* 6 (2019): 197–225.

diachronic scholarship on the textual development of the Samson stories will be reviewed, with an emphasis upon redaction criticism.

Marcus Witte (2000) argues that the Samson stories primarily developed in a three-step process, in which originally independent texts were brought together gradually.[58] According to Witte, the core of the Samson stories is Judg 14:5–15:7, which was expanded by much of the other material in Judg 13:2–16:31a, and then smaller additions by Deuteronomistic and Priestly editors who transformed the figure of Samson into a Nazirite, savior, judge, and prayer who struggled "zwischen Freiheit und Gebundenheit."[59] Thomas Meurer (2001) concludes that Judg 13 and 16 are additions to the older narrative found in Judg 14–15, with Judg 16 concluding the originally profane Samson stories in Judg 14–15 and Judg 13 later transforming the tragic hero into a consecrated Nazirite, whose power and strength are derived from his divine vow rather than his magical hair.[60] According to Meurer, the Nazirite vow is "theologisch ambitionierten Übermalungen" designed to align the Samson stories more closely with the theological vision of the rest of the book of Judges and the DH.[61] Meurer also leaves open the question of the origin behind Judg 16:1–3, since it may originally have been "einer Lokalsage" ("a local legend").[62] Marc Brettler (2002) identifies three original blocks of material behind the Samson stories (Judg 13:2–24; 14:1–15:19; 16:1–30), while

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[58] Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam," 542–43, 547–49.

[59] Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam," 549.

[60] Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 324–25.

[61] Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 326–27.

[62] Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 326.

allowing for the possibility that Judg 16:1–3 is an independent unit.[63] According to

Brettler, these distinct blocks of text were brought together by an editor, likely

Deuteronomistic, who composed Judg 13:1, 15:20, and 16:31 to frame the stories, and

used Judg 13:25 to form a bridge between the birth story and subsequent narratives.[64]

Brettler notes linguistic and thematic variations in each of the blocks, such as the

different sources of Samson's strength, which he uses to distinguish between the different

layers.[65] Brettler also argues for intertextual allusions between the Samson stories and

biblical birth narratives, for example, the mythic liaison between "the sons of God" (בני־

האלהים) and "the daughters of man" (בנות האדם) in Gen 6:1–4 and the possibly semi-divine

parentage of Samson by the messenger of Yhwh and his mother (Judg 13:3–6), as well as

for numerous parallels with the wisdom literature of Israel, such as deciphering riddles

and warnings against foreign women.[66] Philippe Guillaume (2004) builds upon Richter's

analysis and argues that the placement of Jephthah and Samson (Judg 10–16) outside

Richter's proposed *Retterbuch* (Judg 3–9) relegates them as "anti-saviours" and

"losers."[67] According to Guillaume, Judg 10:6–7 introduces both narratives, since the

respective enemies of Jephthah and Samson, the Ammonites and the Philistines, are

among those foreign peoples and their deities whom Israel served. Guillaume follows

Gese and others by positing Judg 14–15 as the core text, which he dates to the seventh

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[63] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42–43, 54–56.

[64] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42–43.

[65] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42.

[66] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 45–47, 50–54.

[67] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 145.

century BCE and argues was a response to Babylonian imperialism, ultimately viewing the Samson stories as "a vast programme of religious deconstruction in favour of radical Yahwism."[68] Guillaume argues that these core texts (Judg 14–15) were combined with the rest of the stories (Judg 13, 16) in the exilic period as part of a "demythizing process" in order for Judah "to rid itself of its Assyrian heritage which had proved ineffective against the Babylonians."[69] Guillaume focuses on the military campaign of the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib throughout the Shephelah in 705 BCE, in which he deported thousands who rebelled against him and reorganized the major territories of Judah and Philistia.[70] Mythic texts ranging from ancient Mesopotamia to Greco-Roman society to pre-Islamic Arabia are included among the many influences and cultural milieu Guillaume uses for comparison.[71] Walter Groß (2007) views most of Judg 14–15 as reflecting the original folk tales that were expanded by a postexilic author, who also added Judg 16 and then Judg 13, to address the mixed marriage problems of his day, mark the end of the judges period with two failures (Jephthah and Samson), and shift the reason for Samson's downfall from his desire for Philistine women to the breaking of his Nazirite vow.[72] According to Groß, the final redactor transformed Samson from an "exemplarisch Leidenden"—like Saul and Zedekiah—into a divine agent of Yhwh through his miraculous birth (Judg 13:2–3), Nazirite vow (Judg 13:4–7), and predestined

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[68] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 156.

[69] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 259.

[70] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 157–58.

[71] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 169–97.

[72] Groß, *Richter*, 657.

battles with the Philistines (Judg 14:4).[73] Groß assigns all of the texts involving Samson's

parents to a postexilic redactor who brought them all together.[74] Cynthia Edenburg

(2018) argues that the Samson story originally ended the Judges scroll before the addition

of Judg 17–21, since it would have been difficult to add without rewriting the entire scroll

because of its long length.[75] According to Edenburg, the connections between the Samson

and Micah stories (cf. Judg 13:2, 25; 16:5, 31; 17:2–3; 18:2, 11) and those between

Samson and Samuel (cf. Judg 13:2, 5; 16:17; 1 Sam 1:1, 11) are also more easily

explained by an outward scribal expansion from the center of the scroll rather than a later

interpolation connecting Samson to the proceeding material in the books of Judges and

Samuel.[76]

Parts from each of these analyses are reflected or used below, especially the

division of the Samson stories into three major sections (Judg 13, 14–15, 16). There are

some significant differences, however, namely the ways in which the compositional

history of the Samson stories and the DH in general influence the development of his

multifaceted character as a Judahite, Israelite, and/or Danite.[77] Rather than set diachronic

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[73] Groß, *Richter*, 90.

[74] Groß, *Richter*, 657–59.

[75] Cynthia Edenburg, "Envelopes and Seams: How Judges Fits (or not) within the Deuteronomistic History," in *Book-Seams in the Hexateuch I*, ed. Christoph Berner and Harald Samuel, FAT 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 353–69. Furthermore, Julio Trebolle Barrera notes textual variants in the LXX that indicate division markers between Judg 16:31 and Judg 17–21. See Julio Trebolle Barrera, "Division Markers as Empirical Evidence for the Editorial Growth of Biblical Books," in *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, ed. Raymond F. Person Jr. and Robert Rezetko, AIL 25 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 167–68.

[76] Edenburg, "Envelopes and Seams," 362–65.

[77] The compositional history and representation of biblical characters portrayed in the Shephelah will be explored in detail by Mahri Leonard-Fleckman in *Scribal Representations and Social Landscapes of the Iron Age Shephelah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

and synchronic readings against each other, the analysis here examines how they inform

one another and the ongoing reception of the text.

1.4. Samson and the Deuteronomistic History

Beyond the Samson stories, the role of the book of Judges within the DH and the

concept of the DH itself, whether in its original or one of its modified forms, have been

contested, as scholars debate the content and contours of Deuteronomistic literature.[78]

The question about which, if any, Samson stories are Deuteronomistic is eclipsed by the

larger question of whether the book of Judges is even part of the DH. Many scholars

argue that Judges was primarily an exilic or postexilic work designed to bridge the

Hexateuch (Gen–Josh) with an older and smaller DH (Sam–Kgs) to form an Enneateuch

(Gen–Kgs) that stretched from creation to exile.[79] Still, others advocate for the complete

abandonment of the DH as a viable model for the book of Judges or eschew

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[78] Thomas Römer and Albert de Pury, "Deuteronomistic Historiography (DH): History of Research and Debated Issues," in *Israel Constructs its History: Deuteronomistic History in Recent Research*, ed. Albert de Pury, Thomas Römer, and Jean-Daniel Macchi, JSOTSup 306 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 24–141; Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisdenbrauns, 2000); Kratz, *Composition*, 153–221; Römer, *So-Called*; Markus Witte, Konrad Schmid, Doris Prechel, and Jan Christian Gertz, eds., *Die deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerke: Redaktions- und religionsgeschichtlich Perspektiven zur "Deuteronomismus"-Diskussion in Tora und Vorderen Propheten*, BZAW 365 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006); and Konrad Schmid, "The Emergence and Disappearance of the Separation between the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History in Biblical Studies," in Thomas B. Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, eds., *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch?: Identifying Literary Works in Genesis Through Kings*, AIL (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 11–24.

[79] See Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 260; Kratz, *Composition*, 205–10; Römer, *So-Called*, 136–37; Spronk, "Book of Judges"; Walter Groß, "Das Richterbuch zwischen deuteronomistischem Geschichtswerk und Enneateuch," in *Das deuteronomistische Geschichtswerk*, ed. Hermann-Josef Stipp, ÖBS 39 (Frankfurt: Lang, 2011), 177–205; Schmid, *Old Testament*, 160–62; and Friedrich-Emanuel Focken, *Zwischen Landnahme und Königtum – Literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Anfang und Ende der deuteronomistischen Richtererzählungen*, FRLANT 258 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 222.

Deuteronomistic issues in favor of pursuing other approaches and questions to the text, such as comparative traditions from the ancient Near East or Hellenistic Judaism.[80]

Nevertheless, many scholars maintain the validity of the DH and still argue for its development beginning in the seventh century BCE under the reign of Josiah.[81] Thomas Römer's hybrid approach to the different models of the DH, what he now calls the "Deuteronomistic Library," especially his emphasis upon the scribal development of individual scrolls within it, is the most compelling interpretation of the evidence.[82] A crucial question for this approach is to determine at which stage the Judges scroll became part of the DH. According to most scholars, the savior stories outlined by Richter at the core of Judges (Judg 3–9) likely reflect older northern Israelite traditions that predate the DH and go as far back as the eighth or even ninth century BCE.[83] A late insertion of the

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[80] See Baker, *Hollow Men*; Sasson, *Judges 1–12*; Spronk, *Judges*.

[81] Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History: Origins, Upgrades, Present Text* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000); Richard Nelson, "The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History: The Case is Still Compelling." *JSOT* 29 (2005): 319–37; Römer, *So-Called*; Gary N. Knoppers, "History as Confession? The Fall of Jerusalem and Judah in Deuteronomistic Perspective," in *Writing, Rewriting, and Overwriting in the Books of Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets – Essays in Honour of Cynthia Edenburg*, ed. Ido Koch, Thomas Römer, and Omer Sergi (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 287–307; idem, "Constructing the Israelite Past in Ancient Judah (I)," in *Prophets, Priests, and Promises Essays on the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Hugh G. M. Williamson, VTSup 186 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 7–27; and idem, "From Israel to Judah in the Deuteronomistic Writing: A History of Calamities?" in *Prophets, Priests, and Promises Essays on the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Hugh G. M. Williamson, VTSup 186 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 28–56.

[82] Römer, *So-Called*, 41–44; idem, "The Current Discussion of the so-called Deuteronomistic History: Literary Criticism and Theological Consequences," *Humanities* 46 (2015): 51–54; and idem, "The So-Called Deuteronomistic History and Its Theories of Composition," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Brent A. Strawn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 303–22.

[83] Kratz, *Composition*, 202–10; Schmid, *Old Testament*, 79; Daniel E. Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah's Bible – History, Politics, and the Reinscribing of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 58–71; Israel Finkelstein, "Major Saviors, Minor Judges: The Historical Background of the Northern Accounts in the Book of Judges," in *Essays on Biblical Historiography: From Jeroboam II to John Hyrcanus*, FAT I 148 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 249–65.

savior stories into the DH during the (post)exilic period—as many scholars presuppose—creates a considerable chronological gap in the interval, that is, between the use of these Israelite traditions in the ninth and/or eighth centuries BCE, their Judahite reappropriation in the seventh century BCE, or at times even later. It also leaves a disjointed transition from the conquest of the land (Joshua) to the rise of the monarchy (Samuel) in its absence, since Samuel's farewell speech about the period of the judges (1 Sam 12) makes little sense without the text that describes it, that is, the Judges scroll.[84]

Instead, it is more likely that these core texts developed in tandem with the DH beginning in the seventh century BCE and likely included the earliest Samson stories (Judg 14–15).[85] This is bolstered by the fact—contrary to Noth and others—that the Samson stories are situated within a Deuteronomistic framework (Judg 13:1; 15:20; 16:31) and contain many explicit and implicit connections with the DH, including Deuteronomistic ideology, language, and themes.[86] For example, the Samson stories

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[84] Edenburg, "Envelopes and Seams," 353–54.

[85] Yairah Amit, "The Book of Judges – Dating and Meaning," in *Homeland and Exile – Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded,* ed. Gershon Galil et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 297–322.

[86] For more on the Deuteronomistic Framework, see Reinhard Müller, "The Redactional Framework of Judges," in *Writing, Rewriting, and Overwriting in the Books of Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets – Essays in Honour of Cynthia Edenburg*, ed. Ido Koch, Thomas Römer, and Omer Sergi (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 127–30. For more on Deuteronomistic ideology, language, and themes, see Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 118–45; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1–9, 320–65; Richard Coggins, "What Does 'Deuteronomistic' Mean?" in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism*, ed. Linda S. Schearing and Steven L. McKenzie, JSOTSup 268 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 22–35; and Cynthia Edenburg, "'Overwriting and Overriding,' Or What is *Not* Deuteronomistic," in *Congress Volume: Helsinki, 2010. 20ᵗʰ Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament*, ed. Martti Nissinen, VTSup 148 (Leiden: Brill, 2012b), 443–60.

For more on the Deuteronomistic features in the Samson stories, see Mark Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists," forthcoming in *The Formation of Biblical Texts: Chronicling the Legacy of Gary Knoppers*, ed. Deidre Fulton et al., FAT I (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

include an introduction to a new cycle of foreign oppression (Judg 13:1); a deep concern about intermarriage with "the uncircumcised" (הערלים) (Judg 14:3; 15:18) and foreign women in general (Judg 16:1–21); the summary of the judge's reign (Judg 15:20; 16:31); the use of the Deuteronomistic phrase "until this day" (עד היום הזה) (Judg 15:19); thematic links with other judges typically deemed Deuteronomistic, such as Shamgar (cf. Judg 3:31; 15:14–17), Gideon (cf. Judg 6:17–24; 13:15–23), and Samuel (cf. Judg 13:2–7; 1 Sam 1:1–11); the leitmotif of sight and (dis)obedience (Judg 13:1; 14:1–3; 16:1, 21, 28); and the shared fate between the last judge and king of the DH (Judg 16:21; 2 Kgs 25:7).[87] If the promises of God in the DH are contingent upon the people of Israel "doing what is right and good in the eyes of Yhwh" (ועשית הישר והטוב בעיני יהוה) (Deut 6:18; 12:28), then Samson represents the antithesis to that Deuteronomic standard as the ultimate blind and failed leader—teaching Israel precisely what *not* to do.[88]

Nonetheless, many of these Deuteronomistic features are either ignored or deemed interpolations designed to integrate the Samson stories into the book of Judges

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[87] The Philistines are referred to as הערלים ("the uncircumcised") only in other Deuteronomistic texts (1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20) with the sole exception of Saul's death, which is likely a repeat by the Chronicler (1 Chr 10:4) of the same account in Samuel (1 Sam 31:4).

Gary N. Knoppers, "Sex, Religion, and Politics: The Deuteronomists on Intermarriage." *HAR* 14 (1994): 121–41; and Bradley L. Crowell, "Good Girl, Bad Girl: Foreign Women of the Deuteronomistic History in Postcolonial Perspective," *BibInt* 21 (2013): 1–18.

Brevard S. Childs, "A Study of the Formula 'Until This Day,'" *JBL* 82 (1963): 279–92; and Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, "'Until This Day' And the Preexilic Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History," *JBL* 122 (2003): 201–27. For other uses of "until this day" (עד היום הזה) in the DH, see Deut 2:22; 3:14; 10:8; 34:6; Josh 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; 8:28, 29; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10; Judg 1:21, 26, 6:24; 10:4; 18:12; 1 Sam 5:5; 6:18; 27:6; 30:25; 2 Sam 4:3; 6:8; 18:18; 1 Kgs 8:8; 9:13; 9:21; 10:12; 12:19; 2 Kgs 2:22; 8:22; 10:27; 14:7; 16:6; 17:23, 34, 41).

[88] Sight is a consistent theme throughout the Samson stories and the Deuteronomistic History, which is why, for example, the rabbis noted that "Samson rebelled using his eyes" (t.Sot 3:15 L.) and "Samson followed his eyes, therefore the Philistines gouged them out" (Sotah 1:8). For more on this theme, see Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*, 201–13.

during the postexilic period.[89] Yet the resumptive repetition in Judg 15:20 and 16:31

likely reveals an older ending to the Samson stories—a conclusion upon which many

scholars agree—and the use of the Deuteronomistic phrase "until this day" (Judg 15:19)

denotes a preexilic date for that older ending.[90] Furthermore, if there is an intentional

connection between Samson and Zedekiah in Judg 16:21, as argued below, then Judg

16:4–31 would most likely be exilic, further solidifying Judg 14–15 in the preexilic

period. A preexilic background is also a more fitting context for the composition of the

earliest Samson stories (Judg 14–15) as they reflect the major cultural and sociopolitical

shifts in the northern Shephelah during the seventh century BCE.[91]

The Deuteronomistic redaction of the Samson stories aligns much better, then,

with these earlier developments and with the exilic death knell sounded by its final judge

(Judg 16:21) and king (2 Kgs 25:7).[92] Attention to this type of scribal activity can help

uncover the possible motivations underlying the *Fortschreibung* of biblical traditions.[93]

Scholars also need to consider the materiality of scrolls and its impact on scribal activity

and the meaning-making process.[94] Given the technical limitations of leather scrolls,

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[89] Groß, *Richter*, 89–90, 657–60.

[90] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42; and Geoghegan, "'Until This Day'."

[91] Steven Weitzman, "Crossing the Border with Samson: Beth-Shemesh and the Bible's Geographical Imagination," in *Tel Beth-Shemesh – A Border Community in Judah. Renewed Excavations 1990–2000: The Iron Age*, Vol. I, ed. Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series 34 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 266–78.

[92] Müller, "Redactional Framework," 134–35.

[93] Reinhard Kratz, "Transformation into Biblical Tradition," in *Historical and Biblical Israel: The History, Tradition, and Archives of Israel and Judah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 75–92.

[94] Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert*, STDJ 54 (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*; David M. Carr, "Rethinking the Materiality of Biblical Texts: From Source, Tradition and Redaction to a Scroll Approach," *ZAW* 132

which were probably the preferred medium for longer texts in Israel, the Samson stories were likely added earlier in the development of the text, since such additions were easier to incorporate at the beginning and ending of scrolls.[95] This type of scribal expansion, in which blocks of texts were appended to compositions to reshape their meaning, what Edenburg calls "overriding" and Sara Milstein "revision through introduction," appears to have been a common practice in the composition of the DH.[96] The unique double ending in the Samson stories (Judg 15:20; 16:31) is the most telltale sign of this scribal activity. Determining the primary reason behind these textual expansions is crucial to understanding the concerns and considerations motivating the scribes.[97]

Accordingly, it will be argued that the different textual layers in the Samson stories are not the result of haphazard editing, but rather carefully crafted scribal additions, whose individual parts are in service to the whole. It will also be argued that the primary motivation behind this textual development is to present Samson as a transitional figure, who functions, in part, as a foil to Israelite leadership in general, and the monarchy in particular. Samson squanders his incredible abilities, many of which reflect royal traits exhibited by prominent Israelite kings.[98] This project is therefore distinct by arguing for a much more significant role of the Samson stories within the textual development of the DH and its perennial concerns with the collapse of Israel's

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(2020): 594–621; and Philip Zhakevich, *Scribal Tools in Ancient Israel: A Study of Biblical Hebrew Terms for Writing Materials and Implements* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

[95] Edenburg, "Envelopes and Seams;" and Tov, *Scribal Practices*, 29–52.

[96] Edenburg, "Rewriting, Overwriting"; and Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe*, 1–41.

[97] Edenburg, "Rewriting, Overwriting," 55.

[98] An insightful observation made by the late Gary N. Knoppers (pers. comm).

political and religious institutions.[99] It does so by synthesizing the data from some of the

diachronic and synchronic approaches outlined above, especially redaction and reception

criticism, with additional consideration given to *the world behind the text* unearthed by

archaeology and the role of scribalism in the composition of biblical texts.

1.5. Methodology

The methodologies utilized within this synthesis will address each of the

interpretive approaches of Ricœur outlined above. Thus, the extensive archaeological

work on Philistia and the surrounding regions in the northern Shephelah during the Iron

Age period offer an abundance of historical data to better understand the *world behind*

the text. Likewise, the work on scribalism by Karl van der Toorn (2007) and William

Schniedewind (2019), the relationship between orality and textuality posed by Niditch

(1996), and the role of memory emphasized by David Carr (2005; 2011) and Daniel

Pioske (2018) in the process of scribalization, provide the interpretive frameworks and

models for tracking the textual development of the Samson stories.[100] It will be argued

that the scribal circles within which the Samson stories were composed were most likely

the "Deuteronomic Schools" advocated by Moshe Weinfeld (1972), Raymond Person Jr.

(2002), and Thomas Römer (2005).[101] The roots of these schools trace back to the scribal

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[99] See Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM, "The Strategy of the Deuteronomistic History: A Proposal," *CBQ* 79 (2017): 1–19.

[100] Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*; William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); idem, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Daniel Pioske, *Memory in a Time of Prose: Studies in Epistemology, Hebrew, Scribalism, and the Biblical Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[101] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic*; Raymond F. Person, Jr., *The Deuteronomic School – History, Social Setting, and Literature*, SBLStBL 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002); and Römer, *So-*

activity in the royal and temple administration of Judah and reflect the broader practice of formal, standardized scribal education in ancient Israel.[102]

The use of redaction criticism will determine to what extent and in what ways editorial activity has likely taken place, as well as to uncover the possible motivations underlying the gradual process of *Fortschreibung* that gave rise to said redaction, further addressing the *world behind the text*. Due to the fragile media upon which the majority of biblical texts were written, namely papyrus and scrolls as opposed to clay tablets, the evidence for scribal omission and supplementation is procured by analyzing the extant textual witnesses, such as Codex Alexandrinus (LXX[A]) and Codex Vaticanus (LXX[B]), and using internal literary criteria, including analogs (e.g., Judg 6:17–24; 13:15–23), narrative obtrusion (Judg 14:4), linguistic deviation (e.g., Judg 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), loanwords (e.g., בבית האסירים; Akk. *bīt asīrī*), and resumptive repetition (Judg 15:20; 16:31) to argue for redaction in the text.[103] While such investigations are inherently

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Called. Cf. Norbert F. Lohfink, "Was There a Deuteronomistic Movement?" in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism*, ed. Linda S. Schearing and Steven L. McKenzie, JSOTSup 268 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 36–66.

[102] Edward Lipiński, "Royal and State Scribes in Ancient Jerusalem," in *Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986*, VTSup 40, ed. John A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 157–64; Christopher Rollston, "Scribal Education in Ancient Israel: The Old Hebrew Epigraphic Evidence," *BASOR* 344 (2006): 47–74; idem, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, ABS 11 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010); and André Lemaire, "Schools and Literacy in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Aliou Niang, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 207–12; and Laura Quick, "Recent Research on Ancient Israelite Education: A Bibliographic Essay," *CBR* 13 (2014): 9–33.

[103] For more on scribal editing through the omission and supplementation of texts in the Hebrew Bible, see Juha Pakkala, *God's Word Omitted – Omission in the Transmission of the Hebrew Bible*, FRLANT 251 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); and Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala, eds., *Insights into Editing in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East – What Does Documented Evidence Tell Us about the Transmission of Authoritative Texts?* CBET 84 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

For more on Akkadian loanwords and narrative obtrusion, see Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew – Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents*

conjectural, especially given the near absence of prior textual recensions, they are not without some external controls.[104]

The diachronic investigation will be in service of a synchronic reading of the text in its final forms, drawing upon intertextual readings of the Samson stories with other biblical and non-biblical texts to bolster its claims, thereby engaging with the *world inside the text*.[105] However, there is an ongoing debate within biblical studies that often divides scholars between a diachronic approach to reading texts and a synchronic one.[106] The question often posed is whether interpreters should focus on the compositional history of a text and utilize the tools of higher and lower criticism to determine its meaning or focus on the final form(s) of a text and use the methodologies of modern and postmodern literary criticism. Scholars on both sides recognize the composite nature of biblical texts, including the long and arduous process of their composition, redaction, and transmission, but they disagree about whether that compositional history can or even should inform the interpretation of the reader. Therefore, the answer to the question varies depending on whom one asks, since strong positions exist on either side. In a fitting analogy, John Barton likens the situation to "armies […] drawn up on opposite hills with a great valley between" where "each camp thinks it is the other that contains

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with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic (New York: Ktav, 2009); and Christopher T. Paris, *Narrative Obtrusion in the Hebrew Bible*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2014).

[104] See the collection of essays in Jeffrey H. Tigay, ed., *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); and Raymond F. Person Jr. and Robert Rezetko, eds., *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, AIL 25 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

[105] For an introduction to the form, function, and history of intertextuality, see Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, The New Critical Idiom, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

[106] See Koog P. Hong, "Synchrony and Diachrony in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," *CBQ* 75 (2013): 521–39; and Marianne Grohmann and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, eds., *Second Wave Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, RBS 93 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 1–14.

the Philistines."[107] There are conciliatory stances that do not view these approaches as inimical to one another.[108] There are even some who argue both approaches represent different sides of the same coin.[109] Still, for many others, the issue is confusing, seen in the disparate uses of the term "intertextuality" itself.[110] This confusion is symptomatic of a guild divided over major hermeneutical fault lines. Perhaps the most precarious of these is whether to assign meaning to the author or the reader of a text. In an attempt to dispel some of this methodological ambiguity, Geoffrey Miller identifies the approaches of biblical scholars claiming intertextuality as "author-oriented" and "reader-oriented."[111]

Miller argues the reader-oriented approach is entirely synchronic. Thus, it is the reader alone who creates meaning, noting that "even if one could determine which texts the author is alluding to, or could ascertain the author's purpose in composing a text, such considerations would be irrelevant."[112] Instead, it is the reader alone who brings her or his

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[107] John Barton, "Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is There Any Common Ground?" in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce, and David E. Orton, BIS 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 3.

[108] See, for example, John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

[109] Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, for example, argue that modern and post-modern biblical criticism are products of Enlightened modernity and essentially engaged in the same project. Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar – A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

[110] Timothy Beal, for example, notes the following: "In recent years, discussions of intertextuality in biblical studies have come increasingly into vogue. Yet to anyone entering this new conversation it quickly becomes apparent that the application of this poststructuralist theoretical term is far from uniform; and the lines of influence by which it has been carried into biblical interpretation are nearly impossible to trace. One reason for this seemingly boundless dissemination of 'intertextuality' within our discipline is that it has been developed in post-structuralism as a *theoretical* rather than a *methodological* term." Timothy K. Beal, "Ideology and Intertextuality: Surplus of Meaning and Controlling the Means of Production," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 27.

[111] Geoffrey D. Miller, "Intertextuality in Old Testament Research," *CBR* 9 (2010): 283–309.

[112] Miller, *Intertextuality*, 286.

experience and knowledge to bear when engaging a text, and it is within this engagement that meaning is produced. Rather than attempt to draw meaning out of a text—assuming this were even possible—the reader establishes a dialogue with the text and the linguistic systems enabling it to be intelligible.

Miller argues the author-oriented approach to intertextuality is primarily dependent upon the author(s) and authorial intentions. Readers can interpret texts alongside other biblical and non-biblical writings, but valid meaning is only derived when it can be determined that the author or authors had certain texts in mind when composing or editing their work.[113] In other words, texts should be interpreted first and foremost within the context of their composition. To ignore this context is to violate the integrity of the text and to betray the author(s)'s intentions. Some scholars have opted to use different labels for this more diachronic approach, such as "inner-biblical exegesis" or "inner-biblical allusion," to distinguish it from the originally ahistorical approach of intertextuality and to emphasize the intentionality of the author drawing the literary connection.[114] Yet, confusion still ensues, since each of these interpretive strategies exercises the most basic part of intertextuality: reading two or more texts together.

The question arises, then, whether there is any common ground between the two approaches. According to many, the answer is little to none. The methodological debate is at an impasse since many biblicists are firmly entrenched in their interpretive positions, with faint interest in reconciling the different approaches.[115]

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[113] Miller, *Intertextuality,* 287.

[114] See Lyle Eslinger, "Inner-biblical Exegesis and Inner-biblical Allusion: The Question of Category," *VT* 42 (1992): 47–58; and Benjamin D. Sommer, "Exegesis, Allusion, and Intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Lyle Eslinger," *VT* 46 (1996): 479–89.

However, some scholars find the diverse approaches, and even the disagreements themselves, a cause for celebration.[116] The more perspectives brought to the text the better. In fact, because biblical literature has provided a myriad of readings to diverse interpreters and interpretive communities over several millennia, biblical scholars are increasingly paying attention to that reception history.[117] Nonetheless, a divide remains, which is precipitated by scholars seeking an interpretive high ground, who are defensive when challenged or prompted to share.[118] But these hermeneutical battlelines are largely unnecessary, since there is plenty of space at the scholarly table to allow for both author-oriented and reader-oriented forms of intertextuality. Of course, the emphasis for each is different. Methodological precision is therefore required to avoid conflict and confusion. Nevertheless, both approaches are similar because they seek to understand the new meaning afforded by reading two or more texts together.

Accordingly, the literary theorists, Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, are helpful in bridging the gap between the two positions. First, most biblical scholars practicing the

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[115] Carolyn J. Sharp, for examples, notes the following: "In some quarters historical criticism is carried out as if postmodernism—as a complex multidisciplinary set of critiques of foundationalist, essentialist, and objectivist claims—had never happened or is of no account. On the other side, I have heard postmodern-leaning professors pronounce with relish that 'historical criticism is dead,' something that would come as quite a surprise to the historical critics who walk by me in the halls of Yale Divinity School every day. Historicists and postmodernists alike seem to be convinced that the *other* side enjoys the lion's share of institutional support and political power in the academy." Carolyn J. Sharp, *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 6–7.

[116] Patricia K. Tull, for example, notes that "biblical scholarship has always benefited from the eclecticism of its practitioners, and trying to fit all scholarship into intertextual categories may lead to the missing of some very great insights that proceed from a technically proficient examination of a sliver of text from all angles." Patricia K. Tull, "Intertextuality and the Hebrew Scriptures," *CurBS* 8 (2000): 75.

[117] See Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

[118] See Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1–25.

different forms of historical criticism know that they cannot access the mind of the author

nor determine authorial intent with absolute certainty.[119] Instead, they seek to establish

the cultural, linguistic, religious, and social contexts from which a biblical text emerged

and make interpretive judgments based on that *Sitz im Leben*.[120] Second, many biblical

scholars informed by literary theory acknowledge the validity of honoring the otherness

of a text in light of its ancient, foreign characteristics.[121] Yet, this historical consciousness

does not solely determine meaning nor supersede other interpretive practices. Rather it is

one approach—even if the primary one—among many for engaging with the biblical text.

Bakhtin's emphasis upon the "utterance" is helpful, then, because he stresses the social

location of authors and readers for better understanding how texts create meaning.[122]

Kristeva, in turn, is helpful because she expands the notion of texts and textuality to

include the entire cultural, political, religious, and social dimensions that encompass

textual production. Hence, she famously wrote that a text is "a permutation of texts, an

intertextuality in the space of a given text," in which "several utterances, taken from other

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[119] For example, John Collins writes that the "meaning intended by an ancient author can, at best, only be reconstructed tentatively, and few historical critics would deny that a text may take on new meanings in changing circumstances. But historical critics usually assume a hierarchy of meanings and regard the historical context as basic or primary." John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4.

[120] Collins, *Bible After Babel*, 4–11.

[121] For example, Sharp writes that "honoring authorial intention as witness is an ethical imperative. If we are not to silence the actual people who spoke and wrote and edited the traditions of Scripture, we must acknowledge that their communicative strategies have meaning beyond what we may necessarily understand." Sharp, *Wrestling the Word*, 5.

[122] Bakhtin's definitive word for socially rooted language was the "utterance." He defined the term in the following way: "Not only the meaning of the utterance but also the very fact of its performance is of historical and social significance, as, in general, is the fact of its realization in the here and now, in given circumstances, at a certain historical moment, under the conditions of the given social situation. The very presence of the utterance is historically and socially significant." Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 120.

texts, intersect and neutralize one another."[123] The influence of her reading of Bakhtin

("utterance") and teacher Roland Barthes ("permutation of texts") informs the ways in

which she describes the meaning-making process.[124]

To return, then, to the categories of Ricœur above, historical critics primarily

focus on the ancient contexts of author(s), while literary critics primarily focus on the

contemporary contexts of reader(s), both of which reflect what Bakhtin called their

"situatedness."[125] In short, historical critics seek to examine *the world behind the text*,

while literary critics seek to examine *the world inside the text*.[126] Therefore, with these

methodological considerations in mind, the Samson stories are explored below with both

an author-oriented and a reader-oriented approach to intertextuality working together as

complementary modes of interpretation. Thus, the direct literary connections between the

Samson stories and other biblical and non-biblical texts will reflect an author-oriented

approach to intertextuality and will be identified as such, while the indirect literary

connections between the Samson stories and other biblical and non-biblical texts will

reflect a reader-oriented approach to intertextuality and will be identified as such.

Lastly, these diachronic and synchronic readings will be able to inform the

earliest Jewish reception history of the Samson stories, thereby engaging with the *world*

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[123] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University, 1980), 36.

[124] For example, Roland Barthes wrote that the "text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture." Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: Bedford, 2000), 256.

[125] See Bakhtin's comment about reading as the "active, effective situatedness of the contemplator *outside* the object contemplated." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 73.

[126] Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87–94.

in front of the text. Brennan Breed's theory of biblical reception history will be employed

to help track the "processual" nature of the Samson stories and the multiple performances

generated by the text and its readers.[127] According to Breed, the boundaries between

textual production and reception are contingent upon a variety of decisions made by

disparate readers and reading communities that "undermine the very distinction between

an original biblical text and its reception."[128] Nonetheless, understanding a text's

variegated origin provides valuable information for tracking what he calls the

"processual" nature of biblical literature as interpreters "chart the virtual dimensions of a

biblical text by analyzing its many and varied contextual actualizations."[129] The

complexity of a text's genesis will vary depending on the text in question. This

provenance is especially difficult for biblical literature, since it is often marked by a

diffuse oral and literary history, making it exceedingly difficult to decipher when

authorship ends, and reception begins.[130]

How, then, does one go about surveying this immense textual terrain? Breed

argues that interpreters must first recognize that the borders often constructed between

the worlds behind, inside, and in front of the text are not nearly as stable as they are often

assumed to be.[131] Although these divisions can be heuristically helpful for organizing

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[127] Brennan W. Breed, "Nomadology of the Bible: A Processual Approach to Biblical Reception History," in *Biblical Reception 1*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 299–320; and idem, *Nomadic Text*.

[128] Breed, "Nomadology of the Bible," 300–07 [302]; and Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 3–13.

[129] Breed, "Nomadology of the Bible," 315.

[130] Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*.

[131] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 5–6; and Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*.

biblical literature, Breed concludes that too often they are designed to delineate the "original" and thereby superior form of the text from its later inferior receptions.[132] Breed argues that these boundaries are unhelpful and illusory since they lead biblical scholars to construct an arbitrary hierarchy of meaning.[133] Instead, he suggests that biblical scholars stop asking "what the text means" and start asking "what can the text *do*?"[134] This subtle shift in interpretive emphasis avoids the strict taxonomy of paying sole attention to authors, texts, or readers, and invites interpreters to attend to the cumulative role played by all three agents in the meaning-making process. By asking what a text can *do* rather than what it *means*, Breed notes that the task of interpreters is less like zookeepers trying to place texts back into their appropriate (contextual) cages and more like explorers observing the ways in which texts behave out in the wild.[135]

Breed's emphasis relativizes the importance ascribed to authors for determining meaning in texts. As he notes, one of the primary characteristics of a text is its durability, as it is "readable long after any act of inscription," and that its ability to escape "contexts is not an anomaly or problem but in fact a central feature."[136] It is important to observe, though, that authors are not completely ignored or set aside, as in some cases of reader-response criticism, but simply recognized as one part of the ongoing continuum in the life

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[132] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 15–51.

[133] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 52–58.

[134] Brennan W. Breed, "What Can a Text Do? Reception History as an Ethology of the Biblical Text," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Emma England and William John Lyons, LHBOTS 615 (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 95–110.

[135] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 93–115.

[136] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 93, 103.

of a text. With each new reader, the meaning-making process resumes.[137] One of the tasks of an interpreter is to study the ways in which the text takes on new meaning or perpetuates existent readings. Drawing upon the work of Gilles Deleuze, Breed argues that it is the "virtual" potential of a text which generates these multiple, even contradictory, interpretations in a text's reception history.[138]

Breed's theory of biblical reception history is useful in at least two ways for this dissertation. First, it provides the interpretive methodology for future analysis of the early Jewish reception of the Samson stories in the writings of Josephus and Pseudo-Philo. Second, it provides the conceptual framework for engaging with what is called here the "virtual reception history" of the Samson stories, that is, the ways in which earlier forms of the text would have been interpreted by hearers and readers during the preexilic, exilic, and postexilic periods of Judah. By establishing the cultural, political, religious, and social contexts of these virtual reading communities, it is possible to posit the ways in which these texts and traditions were developed and received in the past.

Lastly, influential projects serving as the types of scholarship employed in this dissertation will be the works by Cynthia Edenburg (2016), who traces the compositional history of Judg 19–21 and examines its relationship to the larger textual development of the DH; Sara J. Milstein (2016), who demonstrates how paratextual scribal additions, especially introductions, significantly affect the meaning of biblical and near Eastern compositions; and Kelly J. Murphy (2019), who combines redaction and reception

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[137] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 104–14.

[138] Breed, "Nomadology of the Bible," 311–15; and Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 119–41.

criticism to interpret the Gideon cycle through the lens of gender criticism.[139] The

dissertation itself is organized around five chapters, including the introduction and

conclusion that bookends the central arguments, which are previewed below.

1.6. Structure of the Argument

Chapter Two: This chapter ("Ancient Israel and Philistia in Memory and

Tradition") situates the Samson stories within the historical contexts presented in the text,

that is, Israel and Philistia at the beginning of the Iron Age I period (ca. 1200 BCE), in

order to establish to what degree the stories reflect, if at all, authentic knowledge or

memories of an ancient Israelite past. The archaeological research and historical

backgrounds of Israel, Judah, and Philistia in the northern Shephelah during the Iron Age

II period (1000–530 BCE), as well as the later post-exilic periods under Persian and

Hellenistic rule, will provide the historical backdrop for the textual development of the

Samson stories and be addressed at the beginning of each subsequent chapter.

Chapter Three: This chapter ("Samson Fights for Israel: Judges 14–15") focuses

on the literary core of the Samson stories (Judg 14–15) and is read against the backdrop

of the Neo-Assyrian domination of Israel and Judah in the eighth and seventh centuries

BCE. The chapter explores how Neo-Assyrian hegemony might have affected the

composition of the Samson stories during this period in which the mighty Samson is

portrayed as a solitary warrior fighting on behalf of Israel (Judg 15:9–20) against a much

more powerful overlord, the Philistines (Judg 14:4; 15:11). Furthermore, this chapter asks

how the collapse of the northern kingdom and the subsequent influx of Israelites and

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[139] Cynthia Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole – Composition and Purpose of Judges 19–21*, AIL 24 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016); Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe*; and Kelly J. Murphy, *Rewriting Masculinity – Gideon, Men, and Might* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

others into Judah, as well as the weakened borders with Philistia, might have informed the text's concern with intermarriage (Judg 14:1–15:8).

Chapter Four: This chapter ("Samson Dies for Israel: Judges 16") focuses on the first significant paratextual addition to the Samson stories (Judg 16) and is read in view of the destruction and exile of Judah during the Neo-Babylonian period. The primary focus of this chapter is to argue how the Deuteronomistic scribes during the exilic period transformed Samson from a mighty warrior, who fights for Israel, into the tragic final judge of Israel, whose capture, exile, and death (Judg 16:21) foreshadows a very similar fate to Israel's final king (2 Kgs 25:7). This chapter proposes a new reading of Samson's nighttime escape from the surrounding "Gazites" (עזתים) in the Philistine city of Gaza (Judg 16:1–3) by drawing a direct literary connection with another nocturnal flight from an encroaching enemy of Judah, the Babylonians (2 Kgs 25:1–6), thereby drawing these Deuteronomistic texts (Judg 16; 2 Kgs 25) even closer together.

Chapter Five: This concluding chapter ("The Evolution of the Samson Stories") concisely synthesizes the preceding arguments, emphasizing the main contributions of the dissertation for the study of the Samson stories and the textual development of the DH, as well as offers some additional areas of research and questions for further study.

The most significant area for further exploration is the second major paratextual addition to the Samson stories, Judg 13, and reading it against the religious and social reforms associated with the Priestly school during the Persian period. The primary focus of that investigation would be the Priestly redaction of the Pentateuch and DH, which many argue provided the connective tissue for the Enneateauch (Gen–Kgs) and included the addition of Samson's birth narrative (Judg 13), transforming him from a folkloric

and/or mythical strongman into a life-long Nazirite under the care and control of Yhwh. This Priestly redaction significantly changed the story by locating Samson's incredible strength with his obedience to the Nazirite vow (Judg 16:17α) rather than with his magical locks of hair (Judg 16:17β, 22) or the spirit of Yhwh (14:6, 19; 15:14).

Another significant area for further study would ask how the earliest Jewish reception of the Samson stories in the writings of Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*) and Pseudo-Philo (*Biblical Antiquities* and *On Samson*) during the first century CE might bolster some of the diachronic arguments made above by drawing attention to similar tensions perceived by these early readers of the text. It would ask how rewritten scripture (*Jewish Antiquities* and *Biblical Antiquities*) and homiletical discourse (*On Samson*) reflects the Hellenistic Judaism and Greco-Roman culture of their authors and possibly reveal some of the diachronic difficulties encountered by modern biblical scholars. These types of questions will hopefully support the central arguments made here and clear paths for new investigations into the Samson stories.

CHAPTER TWO:

ANCIENT ISRAEL AND PHILISTIA IN MEMORY AND TRADITION

2.1. Introduction

In the epic poem of Hesiod, *Works and Days*, the muses of Pieria sing of a heroic

age in which noble and righteous demigods fight for their country and kin.[140] These

courageous warriors are eventually overcome by relentless battle and their departure from

the mortal world ushers in the final and much-lamented era of humankind, the Iron

Age.[141] In a similar fashion, the biblical authors imagined a time when charismatic

leaders and warriors called judges chosen by God and possessed by the divine spirit,

ruled in the land of Israel (2 Kgs 23:22; Isa 1:26; Ruth 1:1).[142] That period is primarily

portrayed in the book of Judges, a political and theological text that explores, among

other things, the tumultuous transition of tribal Israel from the prophetic leadership of

Moses and Joshua to the emergence of the monarchy under Saul and David.[143] The core

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[140] For an introduction, translation, and commentary on the work, see Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days*, *Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most, LCL 57 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[141] As Hesiod declares, "If only then I did not have to live among the fifth men, but could have either died first or been born afterwards!" (*Works and Days,* 174).

[142] For more on the possession of the judges by the divine spirit (רוח יהוה) and its role in the heroic traditions of the book of Judges, see Baruch A. Levine, "Religion in the Heroic Spirit: Themes in the Book of Judges," in *Thus Says the Lord: Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R. Wilson*, ed. John J. Ahn and Stephen Cook, LHBOTS 502 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 27–42; and Dylan Johnson, "The 'Spirit of Yhwh' and Samson's Martial Rage: A Leitmotif of the Biblical Warrior Tradition," *VT* 72 (2022): 214–236.

[143] For more on the themes of leadership and politics in the book of Judges, see Marc Z. Brettler, "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics," *JBL* 108 (1989): 395–418; Jo Ann Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel' – The Era of the Judges," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 177–218; Susan Niditch, "Judges, Kingship, and Political Ethics: A Challenge to the Conventional Wisdom," in *Thus Says the Lord – Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R. Wilson*, ed. John J. Ahn and Stephen L. Cook, LHBOTS 502

of the book is a collection of legendary tales about heroes who deliver Israel from the

hands of her enemies in a cyclical carnival of violence. Thus, adversarial kings are

dismembered (Judg 1:6), gutted (Judg 3:21), and beheaded (Judg 8:21); a military general

is impaled (Judg 4:21; 5:26); a native daughter is ritually sacrificed (Judg 11:30–40); and

the archenemies of Israel, the Philistines, are singlehandedly bludgeoned to death (Judg

3:31; 15:14–16) and crushed to a pulp (Judg 16:27–30) after burning some of their own

(Judg 15:6). These violent yet celebrated tales of battle and betrayal reflect what Mark

Smith calls the literary commemoration of "warrior culture" throughout the ancient

Aegean and Near East, seen especially in the poetic victory songs of warriors after battle

in the Bible (e.g., Exod 15:1–21; Judg 5; 2 Sam 1:19–27).[144] In the book of Judges, this

commemoration is introduced by a theological framework that highlights the failure of

tribal Israel to fully conquer the Canaanites residing in the promise land (Judg 1:19–36)

and reveals how Yhwh uses the inhabitants of Canaan and their gods as a snare (מוקש) to

test (נסה) the Israelites' obedience to the covenant and commandments given to their

ancestors through Moses (Judg 2:2–3, 22–23; 3:1, 4).[145] Unlike the relatively successful

campaign of Israel under the command of Joshua, in the book of Judges the Israelites

repeatedly fail to live up to the call of the covenant and they worsen from one tribe and

judge to the next in a downward spiral that leads to the deterioration of the bonds

between the people and their God.[146]

Among these disparate tales of dominance and deliverance are those concerning

Samson, the last "major judge" in the book, whose entire life is recorded from birth until

burial and who receives more attention than any other character in the book of Judges.[147]

While the stories about Samson contain various elements of folklore, myth, and religion,

the question of history and whether the authors of these texts had any authentic

knowledge or memories of ancient Israel or Philistia is contested.[148] According to most

scholars, the Samson stories were written no earlier than the eighth century BCE, with

some even arguing as late as the early Hellenistic period.[149] Because the tales of Samson

take place near the end of the tribal period (ca. twelfth century BCE) they were written

anywhere from four-to-eight-hundred years after the events in question, increasing

scholarly suspicion of any "real history" underlying their composition.[150] Furthermore,

the stories are told from the perspective of an anonymous narrator, which conceals any

clues about the authors and their historical contexts. Such a perspective reflects what

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[146] For more on the deteriorating relationship between the Israelites and their God in the book, see J. Cheryl Exum, "The Center Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 410–31.

[147] The other "major" judges are Othniel (Judg 3:7–11), Ehud (Judg 3:12–30), Shamgar (Judg 3:31), Deborah and Barak (Judg 4–5), Gideon (Judg 6–8), Abimelech (Judg 9), and Jephthah (Judg 10:6–12:7).

[148] See, for example, Erasmus Gass, "Simson und die Philiste – Historische und Archäologische Rückfragen," *RB* 114 (2007): 372–402.

[149] See, for example, Amit, "Book of Judges"; and Spronk, "Book of Judges," 23–28.

[150] See, for example, the skeptical judgments of Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 1–8; and Ernst Axel Knauf, "History in Judges," in *Israel in Transition. From Late Bronze II to Iron IIa (c. 1250–850 B.C.E.). Volume 2. The Texts*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe (New York T&T, 2010), 140–149.

Peter Machinist identifies as the "absent I" of the historian writing in the pre-Hellenistic Near East, whose task was to communicate the authority of the gods, kings, and traditions of the people.[151] According to Machinist, the primary role of the ancient Near Eastern historian "is to reveal, from his recording of the past, the nature of these forms [of authority]: their power, their function, and their effect on humans and the human world, particularly the negative effects if they are challenged or otherwise heeded improperly."[152] In the book of Judges, as well as the rest of the DH, the main form of authority—at least human authority—concerning the authors is political. Ultimate leadership, of course, belongs first and foremost to Yhwh, who fights for Israel (Judg 5) and who is meant to "rule" (משל) over the people (Judg 8:23). This is followed by the various tribal leaders who are summoned by Yhwh to "deliver" (ישע) and/or "judge" (שפט) the Israelites in their time of need.[153] However, given their late compositional dates, the stories in the book of Judges, like most biblical literature, reveal just as much about the contemporary concerns of their authors as they do about the characters that inhabit their world. Thus, considering the authorial anonymity and the wide chronological gap between the composition of the book and the events it purports to narrate, it is not surprising that so many scholars are suspicious of uncovering any historical vestiges in the texts beyond those reflecting the time of their composition.[154]

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[151] Peter Machinist, "The Voice of the Historian in the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean World," *Interpretation* 57 (2003): 117–37.

[152] Machinist, "Voice," 127.

[153] See Friedrich-Emanuel Focken, "The Structure of Offices in the Heroic Narratives and Judge Narratives and Their Literary-Historical Development," in *Debating Authority: Concepts of Leadership in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets*, eds. Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz, BZAW 507 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 219–47.

Yet there remain multiple features in the text that belie such skeptical judgments, as the Samson stories contain a significant familiarity with the distinct culture, geography, language, and religious practices of ancient Israel and Philistia. These features appear to reflect genuine knowledge and memories of late second and early first millennium life for the Israelites and Philistines residing in the Shephelah.[155] For this reason, such textual features warrant further investigation. Each of the categories outlined above (i.e., culture, geography, language, and religion) will be read against the archaeological background of the northern Shephelah to determine to what degree, if at all, the stories contain authentic knowledge and memories of an ancient past and then consider the ways in which later authors may have incorporated those into their contemporary texts.[156] Before addressing those specific issues in greater detail though, an overview of some of the major cultural and geopolitical shifts in the southern Levant

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[154] See, for example, the following conclusion by Niels Peter Lemche: "It is one of the theses of this book that the Israel found on the pages of the Old Testament is an artificial creation which has little more than one thing in common with the Israel that existed once upon a time in Palestine, that is, the name. Apart from this not absolutely insignificant element, the Israelite nation as explained by the biblical writers has little in the way of a historical background. It is a highly ideological construct created by ancient scholars of Jewish tradition in order to legitimize their own religious community and its religio-political claims on land and religious exclusivity." Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 165–66.

[155] Accordingly, Amihai Mazar argues that "[a]rchaeology can provide evidence for specific socio-economic and political situations, for certain sites and events related to the thirteenth to tenth centuries B.C.E. and echoed in the Dtr narratives. This information could not have been invented by the authors and thus reflects old memories preserved during several centuries. This evidence should be taken into account when reconstructing the long path that such memories travelled, from oral transmission, written archives, monumental inscriptions and pre-Dtr texts, until they were reworked and embedded in the Dtr literature" ("Archaeology and the Bible: Reflections on Historical Memory in the Deuteronomistic History," in *Congress Volume Munich 2013*, ed. Christl M. Maier, VTSup 163 [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 368–69).

[156] For a methodological discussion of memory and ancient history, see Pioske, *Memory in a Time*, 16–84.

during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age I period (ca. 1150 BCE) is in order.[157]

2.2. The Emergence of Ancient Israelites and Philistines

The exact nature and processes by which the peoples of Israel and Philistia emerged in the southern Levant at the end of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age is disputed among contemporary archaeologists and biblical scholars. In place of the older biblical archaeology models that were primarily intended to bolster the historicity of the Bible—practiced most notably in North America by William F. Albright and George E. Wright—many contemporary scholars employ a host of methodologies that critically examine the material and textual evidence on their own terms before attempting any synthesis of the data drawn from these different sources.[158] The conclusions drawn from these distinct approaches and their subsequent syntheses have emphasized the complexity and fluidity of the emergence and migration of the ancient Israelites and Philistines into the land of Canaan.[159] Indeed, the combination of archaeology, biblical criticism, and

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[157] For an overview of the chronology and geography of the ancient Levant, see Ilan Sharon, "Levantine Chronology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000–332 BCE*, ed. Ann E. Killebrew and Margreet Steiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 44–65; and Matthew Suriano, "Historical Geography of the Ancient Levant," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000–332 BCE*, ed. Ann E. Killebrew and Margreet Steiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9–23.

[158] For more on the history and development of biblical and Syro-Palestinian archaeology, see William G. Dever, "Syro-Palestinian and Biblical Archaeology," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 31–74; and Thomas W. Davis, *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[159] See, for example, Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90–131; Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity – An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.*, ABS 9 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005); Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis - Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Equinox, 2006); William G. Dever, "The Emergence of Israel in the Light of History," in *Beyond the Texts: An*

social-scientific approaches has painted a complicated portrait of these ancient peoples and their cultural, political, religious, and social practices.[160] Even the distinctions between Canaanites, Israelites, and Philistines have been problematized by the archaeological record, since the mixed material culture and stratigraphy of many of the sites often reveal a history of fluctuating allegiances, behaviors, and identities.[161] Furthermore, a focus on the small scale community practices of people groups in the southern Levant during the Early Iron Age will give a more nuanced understanding of what we mean by "ancient Israel."[162]

For this reason, scholarly reconstructions of this transitional period should proceed cautiously, given the paucity and undetermined nature of the evidence. Nevertheless, this interdisciplinary research does illuminate two related questions posed here: What does the archaeological record and comparative material from the ancient Near East reveal about the history and nature of ancient Israel and Philistia? And in what ways do the Samson stories reflect authentic knowledge and memories of that ancient past?

Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 119–258; and Aren M. Maeir, "Philistine and Israelite Identities: Some Comparative Thoughts," *WO* 49.2 (2019): 151–60.

[160] See, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, ABS 17 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007); and Lester L. Grabbe, "The Principles and Methods of Investigating Ancient Israel," in *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3–38.

[161] For example, Aren Maeir argues that when delineating between Canaanites, Israelites, and Philistines in Iron Age Shephelah, "one must look not at clearly circumscribed and demarcated regions for each of these groups but rather to a continuum," which he posits along the following lines: Philistine à Philistine/Canaanite à Canaanite à Canaanite/Israelite à Israelite. Maeir, "Philistine and Israelite Identities," 153–55.

[162] Aren M. Maeir, "On Defining Israel: Or, Let's do the *Kulturkreislehre* Again!" *HBAI* 2 (2021): 106–48.

The earliest extant mention of the people of Israel comes from the Merenptah Stele, a war memorial commemorating the victory of Egypt over the Libyans and their allies, whom scholars often designate the "Sea Peoples," at the river Delta in the fifth year of Pharaoh Merenptah (ca. 1209/08 BCE).[163] The identification of a people group known as "Israel" is located near the end of the stele in the concluding parts of the triumph-hymns, in which the Pharaoh boasts that "Israel is laid waste; his seed is no more."[164] Unlike the other entities mentioned in the stele, such as the peoples of "Hatti" (Neo-Hittites), "Canaan" (Canaanites), and "Hurru" (Hurrians), or the city-states of Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam, "Israel" is the only one designated simply by the sign for a foreign people rather than a foreign polity.[165] Thus, Kenneth Kitchen argues that "[as] far as Merenptah's soldiers, record-keepers and this stela's scribe and engraver were concerned, this 'Israel' was a people-group in western Palestine, and neither a land nor a mini-state."[166] The meaning and significance of this designation is debated among scholars, with some, the so-called minimalists, even questioning the very existence of any people called Israel at the time.[167] Still, while some disassociate the Israel of Merenptah

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[163] For a translation and annotation of Merenptah's war texts, see Benedict G. Davies, *Ramesside Inscriptions, Translated and Annotated, Notes and Comments, Volume IV: Merenptah and the Late Nineteenth Dynasty* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

[164] For a detailed examination of the text, see Kenneth Kitchen, "The Physical Text of Merenptah's Victory Hymn (The 'Israel' Stela)," *JSSEA* 24 (1997): 71–77.

[165] Thus, Kenneth Kitchen notes the following: "The three city-states, Ashkelon, Gezer and Yenoam, are correctly given the throw-stick determinative for 'foreign' entity, and the three-hills sign for foreign territory. By contrast, 'Israel' is also determined with the throw-stick of foreigners, plus here the man + woman over plural strokes–the mark in numberless instances of a people-group, and *not* of a settled state with an urban centre." Kenneth Kitchen, "The Victories of Merenptah, and the Nature of Their Record," *JSOT* 28 (2004): 271–72.

[166] Kitchen, "Victories of Merenptah," 272.

[167] Keith W. Whitelam, "'Israel is Laid to Waste; His Seed is No More': What if Merneptah's Scribes Were Telling the Truth?" *BibInt* 8 (2000): 8–22; Ingrid Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson, "The

from the people of Israel known from later biblical traditions, many scholars draw a

connection between the two because of the proximity in time and space of Merenptah

with the migration and settlement of semi-nomadic pastoralists in the highlands,

identified by William Dever and others as "proto-Israelites," beginning in the late

thirteenth century BCE.[168] The Merenptah Stele is accompanied by four battle reliefs that

were discovered at the Karnak complex in Luxor, which Egyptologists have attributed to

Pharaoh Merenptah as well. Of particular interest is the fourth relief, which depicts the

battle of the Egyptians against the fortified cities of Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam,

alongside, according to Frank Yurco, the people of Israel, who notably share the same

clothing and hairstyles as their Canaanite comrades.[169]

    The Merenptah Stele and the accompanying reliefs at Karnak provide a small

glimpse into the larger reality of the collapse of the great empires of the Late Bronze Age

and Mycenaean palace system, the weakened Canaanite city states, and the withdrawal of

Egyptian control over the southern Levant in the twelfth century BCE.[170] In turn, these

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Victory Song of Merneptah, Israel, and the People of Palestine," *JSOT* 27 (2002): 3–18; Michael Hasel, "The Structure of the Final Hymnic-Poetic Unit on the Merneptah Stela," *ZAW* 116 (2004): 75–81; Kitchen, "Victories of Merneptah"; and Alexandru Mihaila, "Ethnicity in Early Israel: Some Remarks on Merneptah's Stele," in *Anuarul Facultatii de Teologie Ortodoxa "Patriarhul Justinian"* (Bucuresti: Universitatea din Bucuresti, 2010), 367–84.

[168] See, for example, Ann E. Killebrew, "Early Israel: A 'Mixed Multitude'" in *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity – An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.*, ABS 9 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 149–96; Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis - Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Equinox, 2006); Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel*, ANEM 5 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 13–36; and William G. Dever, "The Emergence of Israel in the Light of History," in *Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 119–258.

[169] Frank J. Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt," *BAR* 16.5 (1990): 20–38; idem, "Merneptah's Canaanite Campaign and Israel's Origins," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Ernest S. Frerich and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 27–55.

tectonic shifts created a power vacuum in which decentralized polities, polymorphic groups in the highlands, and waves of migrants from across the Aegean and Northern Syria were able to flourish along the Mediterranean coast and further inland.[171]

Accordingly, the sudden appearance in the late twelfth century BCE of large quantities of Aegean-style material culture, especially Mycenaean IIIC pottery (Myc IIIC), at sites such as Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath, likely reflect the migration of Philistine groups into the southern Levant.[172] The dominant interpretation throughout the twentieth century of this Philistine migration, commonly called the "Philistine Settlement Paradigm," was championed by Albright (1932) and Albrecht Alt (1944). Drawing heavily upon biblical and Egyptian textual sources, Albright and Alt argued that the *Peleset* (Philistines) and their fellow Sea Peoples were defeated by the Egyptians in battle and then resettled in strongholds across the southern Levant, only to later rebel and free themselves from Egyptian control.[173] According to this traditional model, the foreign people group, later identified in biblical traditions as the Philistines, settled along the

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[170] Ann E. Killebrew, "Introduction to the Levant During the Transitional Late Bronze Age/Iron Age I and Iron Age II Periods," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000-332 BCE*, eds. Ann E. Killebrew and Margreet Steiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 594–606.

[171] See, for example, Dever, "Emergence of Israel," 119–247; Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis*, 159–87; Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples*; Aren M. Maeir and Louise A. Hitchcock, "The Appearance, Formation and Transformation of Philistine Culture: New Perspectives and New Finds," in *"Sea Peoples" Up-To-Date: New Research on Transformations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 13th–11th Centuries BCE*, ed. Peter M. Fischer and Teresa Bürge, Contributions to the Chronology of the Eastern Mediterranean 35 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017), 149–62; Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity"; and Marc Van de Mieroop, "The Collapse of the Regional System and Its Aftermath," in *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*, 3rd ed., Ancient History Encyclopedia (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016), 202–20.

[172] Yasur-Landau, *The Philistines*, 216–81.

[173] For more on the Egyptian sources, see David O'Connor, "The Sea Peoples and the Egyptian Sources," in *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment*, ed. Eliezer D. Oren, University Museum Monograph 108 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 85–102.

coast of the southern Levant and distinguished themselves sharply from the cultural

practices of their Canaanite and emerging Israelite neighbors residing further inland.

Following two centuries (twelfth–tenth centuries BCE) of strict boundary maintenance,

the Philistines gradually lost their dominance and influence over their neighbors and

rapidly assimilated to the growing power in the region: the Israelites—or so the story

goes.[174]

Newer models drawing upon the extensive excavations and material culture

recently unearthed throughout the Shephelah, along with more critical interpretations of

the textual sources, paint a much more complex picture, highlighting the diverse origins

and fluidity of the Philistine migrations as well as the emergence of Israel.[175] As Aren

Maeir notes, Philistine culture and the presence of Aegean-style material culture was

already present in the late thirteenth century BCE at Canaanite sites, leading him to

conclude that the Philistines were an "entangled culture," that is, "comprised of a broad

range of traditions and influences, which has emerged together to form a unique and

readily definable new cultural entity, quite different from its origins, but nevertheless

'carrying' memories, in diverse manners, of the various influences and origins."[176] In

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[174] For a recent defense of the Philistine Settlement Paradigm, see Avraham Faust and Justin Lev-Tov, "The Constitution of Philistine Identity: Ethnic Dynamics in Twelfth to Tenth Century Philistia," *OJA* 30 (2011): 13–31. For a rebuttal, see Israel Finkelstein, "Is the Philistine Paradigm Still Viable?" in *The Synchronisation of Civilisations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C. III: Proceedings of the SCIEM 2000 – 2nd EuroConference, Vienna, 28th of May – 1st of June* 2003, ed. Manfred Bietak and Hermann Hunger, *Contributions to the Chronology of the Eastern Mediterranean* IX (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 517–23.

[175] See, for example, Assaf Yasur-Landau, "The Philistine Society and the Settlement Process," in *The Philistines and Aegean Migration at the End of the Late Bronze Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 282–334; Ann E. Killebrew, "The Philistines: Urban Colonists of the Early Iron Age," in *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity – An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.*, ABS 9 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 197–246; and Maeir and Hitchcock, "Appearance, Formation and Transformation of Philistine Culture."

other words, rather than maintaining strict boundaries with their Canaanite neighbors, the Philistines were initially a mixed group "from various parts of the Aegean, Cyprus, Anatolia, South-eastern Europe and beyond" and found themselves in "an on-going negotiation and renegotiation between various cultural groups of local and foreign origin."[177] Intriguingly, these types of entangled identities and porous borders among Canaanites, Philistines, and later Israelites are reflected throughout the Samson stories, in which Danites, Judahites, Philistines, and others are portrayed freely traversing the land around "Zorah and Eshtaol" (Judg 13:25; 16:31) and engaging in a variety of cultural, political, and social exchange.[178]

To what extent, then, did the biblical authors carry memories of this ancient past into their writings when shaping the contours of their present? According to Israel Finkelstein, the answer is none whatsoever since the portrayal of ancient Philistia in the Bible entirely reflects the late-monarchic perspective of the biblical authors. Hence, Finkelstein concludes that the "biblical references to the Philistines do not contain any memory of early Iron I (twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE) events or culture behavior" and "most of the Philistine material, even if historically stratified and containing seeds of early tales as well as evidence for more than one redaction, is based on the geographical, historical and ideological background of late-monarchic times."[179]

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[176] Maeir, "Philistine and Israelite Identities," 152.

[177] Maeir and Hitchcock, "Appearance, Formation," 151–52.

[178] See Weitzman, "Crossing the Border"; Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between: The Elusiveness of Israel's Iron Age Timnah," in *At the Margins: Interconnections of Power and Identity in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Sara Mohr and Shane M. Thompson (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2023), 68–90; and Christine Neal Thomas, "Samson Went Down to Timnah: Gender and Borders in Judges 14–15," *MAARAV* 25 (2021): 205–20.

Yet there are features in the Samson stories that resist such strict historical reductions by Finkelstein and others, since the "seeds of early tales" embedded in the text may, in fact, carry more genuine knowledge and memory of the past than appears at first blush. Indeed, as the form critics have long demonstrated, many of the constituent parts of the Samson stories hark back to genuine older oral traditions derived from ancient *Sitz im Leben*.[180] To draw out some of those memories embedded in the text, it will be useful to read the Samson stories against the archaeological backdrop of its narrative setting, the Sorek Valley (נחל שרק), and see what cultural, geographical, linguistic, and religious issues come to the fore. Accordingly, two thoroughly excavated sites from the Sorek Valley, Tel Beth-Shemesh—etymologically related to the name of Samson (שמשון)—and Tel Batash, will be the main focus of inquiry to examine whether the Samson stories reflect any ancient Israelite and Philistine realities during the Iron Age I and II periods.[181] By analyzing the archaeological and biblical evidence independently then bringing them together for a synthesis, it will be shown how the textual layers of the Samson stories reflect some of the material layers of the excavated tells throughout the Sorek Valley.[182]

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[179] Finkelstein, "Philistines in the Bible," 156.

[180] See Gunkel, "Simpson," 38–64; Hugo Gressmann, *Die Anfänge Israels* (*von 2. Mose bis Richter und Ruth*), 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), 237–57; and Serge Frolov, *Judges*, 239–76.

[181] For an overview of the recent excavations, see Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, eds., *Tel Beth-Shemesh – A Border Community in Judah. Renewed Excavations 1990–2000: The Iron Age*, Vol. I, Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series 34 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

[182] For an overview of the archaeological history of the Sorek Valley, see Amihai Mazar, "The Northern Shephelah in the Iron Age: Some Issues in Biblical History and Archeology," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, J. Cheryl Exum, and Lawrence E. Stager (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 247–67.

This methodology mirrors what Elizabeth Bloch-Smith calls the "Tell-Tale" approach in her study of ancient Israelite ethnicity, in which she combines archaeological and biblical analysis to better understand the "collective memory" forged by Israelites over a prolonged period of time through a combination of circumstantial traits and primordial features in contradistinction to other people groups, such as the Canaanites and Philistines.[183] As she notes, "archaeology furthers our knowledge of Philistines, Canaanites, and Israelites, for it elucidates ascribed significant features of early Israel and preserves both what was remembered and what was forgotten in Israel's 'collective memory.'"[184] By interpreting the textual traditions of *biblical* Israel alongside the material culture of *ancient* Israel, each are mutually illuminated by the other, allowing for a deeper understanding of the socio-historical contexts from which these collective memories emerged and for dating the composition of biblical texts more accurately.[185] This approach, however, is not only designed to highlight similarities among the different types of evidence but to identify differences as well.

2.3. Tel Beth-Shemesh

Tel Beth-Shemesh is an ancient border settlement on the southern bank of the Sorek Valley that separates the northern Shephelah from the Coastal Plain and guards the entrance to the Judean hill country (see Fig. 2.1).[186] The site was positioned at the

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[183] Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What is Remembered and What is Forgotten in Israel's History," *JBL* 122 (2003): 401–25.

[184] Bloch-Smith, "Israelite Ethnicity," 425.

[185] Bloch-Smith, "Archaeology – What Can It Teach Us?" in *The Wiley Black Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 13–27.

[186] Bunimovitz and Lederman, *Tel Beth-Shemesh*, 40.

intersection of a variety of competing interests among Canaanites, Israelites, and

Philistines in the Iron I period (twelfth–tenth centuries BCE).[187] The current lead

excavators, Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, describe the dynamic relationship

shared between these different people groups during the Iron I and IIb periods (twelfth–

eighth centuries BCE) as the "Sorek Valley Seesaw" since the "boundary between these

political and cultural entities was not a fixed and rigid line but fluctuated and shifted, in

resonance with the checkered history of the northern Shephelah."[188] During these periods,

this "seesaw effect" can be seen in the oscillating cultural, geographical, and political

realities among the Canaanite, Israelite, and Philistine inhabitants in and around Tel Beth-

Shemesh, which shifted depending upon the relative strength of each group. For example,

when nearby Philistines sites such as Tel Miqne-Ekron were strong then Canaanite or

Israelite sites in the region were weak and vice versa. According to Bunimovitz and

Lederman, it is within this back-and-forth struggle during the Iron Age that Israelite

identity was ultimately forged "under the Philistine hammer."[189]

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[187] See Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, "Migration, Hybridization and Resistance: Identity Dynamics in Early Iron Age Southern Levant," in *The Cambridge Prehistory of the Bronze and Iron Age Mediterranean*, ed. A. B. Knapp and Peter van Dommelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 252–65.

[188] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 27.

[189] Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, "A Border Case: Beth-Shemesh and the Rise of Ancient Israel," in *Israel in Transition: From the Late Bronze II to Iron IIa (c. 1250–850 b.c.e.)*, Vol. 1, ed. Lester L. Grabbe, LHBOTS 491, European Seminar in Historical Methodology 7 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 28.
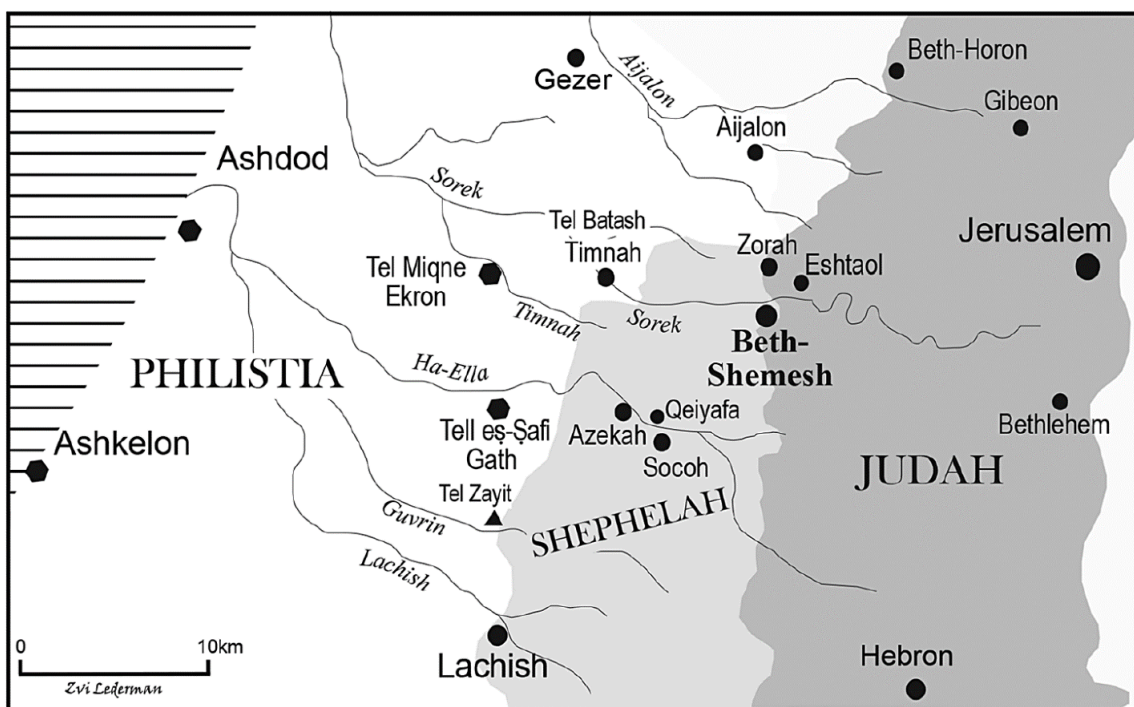
Figure 2.1. The Sorek Valley and Adjacent Regions.

There were four occupation phases during the Iron I period at Tel Beth-Shemesh (Levels VII–IV), but unlike most of the neighboring sites in the Sorek Valley, the material culture at Tel Beth-Shemesh was primarily Canaanite rather than Philistine.[190] The most notable absence at the site is any indication of pork consumption, seemingly a staple of the Philistine diet, as well as an emerging identity marker between local people groups in the Iron I period.[191] Faunal analysis has traced the animal DNA from some of the pig bones found at Philistine sites with a European species of the animal, indicating

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[190] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 30.

[191] See Avraham Faust, "Pigs in Space (and Time): Pork Consumption and Identity Negotiations in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages of Ancient Israel" *NEA* 81 (2018): 276–99.

that the pigs were likely brought over by the Sea Peoples from the mainland during their

migrations across the Mediterranean Sea.[192] However, as noted above, the origins of the

Philistines is complex and not limited to just the Aegean.[193] Moreover, as Maeir has

noted, pig consumption in the Aegean is not entirely consistent, so simple connections

drawn between material culture and people groups should be avoided.[194] The Aegean-

style cooking vessels and square hearths—as opposed to the large rounded vessels used

by the Canaanites—typically found at Philistine sites were also not present at Tel Beth-

Shemesh.[195] The architectural layout and style of the buildings differed at Tel Beth-

Shemesh, which maintained the Canaanite architecture inherited from the Late Bronze

period rather than adopt the simple, elongated layout and style of Philistine architecture,

seen especially in their domestic spaces.[196] Bunimovitz and Lederman argue that the

differences in architecture, cookware, and dietary practices among these neighboring sites

ultimately require a cultural rather than economic or ecological explanation.[197] They

hypothesize that these distinguishing features reflect the intentional choices by local

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[192] Meirav Meiri et al., "Ancient DNA and Population Turnover in Southern Levantine Pigs-Signature of the Sea Peoples Migration?" *Scientific Reports* 3 (2013): 1–8.

[193] Yasur-Landau, "Philistine Society"; Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity*; and Maeir and Hitchcock, "Appearance"; and Maeir, "Philistine and Israelite Identities."

[194] Aren M. Maeir, review of *Evolution of a Taboo: Pigs and People in the Ancient Near East*, by Max D. Price, *BAR* 48 (2022): 26.

[195] Assaf Yasur-Landau, "Old Wine in New Vessels - Intercultural Contact, Innovation and Aegean, Canaanite, and Philistine Foodways," *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 32 (2005): 168–91.

[196] See Schlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, "Canaanite Resistance: The Philistines and Beth-Shemesh—A Case Study from Iron Age I," *BASOR* 364 (2011): 41–42; and Adam Jonathan Aja, "Philistine Domestic Architecture in the Iron Age I" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009).

[197] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 31. See, also, Karin Tamar et al., "Geography and Economic Preferences as Cultural Markers in a Border Town: The Faunal Remains from Tel Beth-Shemesh, Israel," *International Journal of Osteoarcheology* 25 (2013): 414–25.

Canaanite and Israelite inhabitants to differentiate themselves from their Philistine

neighbors who enjoyed cultural and territorial dominance at the time.[198]

Nevertheless, the balance of power eventually shifted away from the Philistines

after they destroyed Tel Beth-Shemesh and nearby Khirbet Qeiyafa, possibly prompting

the local Canaanites to ally themselves with the emerging Judahites at the beginning of

the Iron II period (tenth to eighth centuries BCE).[199] Consequently, the Iron II period

brought about numerous shifts in the landscape of the Sorek Valley. The major Philistine

site of Tel Miqne-Ekron, for example, about ten kilometers west of Tel Beth-Shemesh,

steadily declined in power and size during this period, due perhaps to renewed interest by

Egypt in Canaan or the emergence of a united monarchy in Israel. The downfall of Ekron

also likely caused the subsequent abandonment of its "daughter" settlement five

kilometers east, Tel Batash, in the tenth century BCE. Yet, despite the waning Philistine

influence in the Sorek Valley, Tel Beth-Shemesh thrived during the Iron II period by

expanding its boundaries, fortifying its buildings, and installing defensive structures in

the wake of the Philistine decline. According to the excavators, this expansion and

fortification of Tel Beth-Shemesh transformed the modest settlement into a city, which

may also have served as the administrative center of Solomon's second district (1 Kgs

4:9).[200] The Iron II period therefore solidified Judah's foothold over against the

Philistines in the Sorek Valley, especially after the increased fortification of Tel Beth-

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[198] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Canaanite Resistance," 45–47.

[199] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 31.

[200] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 32.

Shemesh, which reflected "all the symbols of centralized political power."[201] In short, Judah was up and Philistia was down.

But the seesaw would inevitably swing back in the opposite direction, as Tel Beth-Shemesh was destroyed again and many of its buildings were burned to the ground at the beginning of the eighth century BCE. The reason for the destruction of the site at this time is debated among scholars and multiple theories have been proposed, including the wars between Joash and Amaziah (2 Kgs 14), a Philistine attack on a weakened Judah (2 Chr 28:18; cf. 2 Kgs 16:6–9; Isa 9:10–11), the invasions of the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, or a devastating earthquake during the days of Uzziah and Jeroboam (Amos 1:1; Zech 14:5).[202] Some scholars argue that the supposed Philistine attacks merely reflect the religious ideology and social situation of the Chronicler(s) writing much later during the Persian period rather than any historical reality in the northern Shephelah during the early eighth century BCE.[203] Nonetheless, these attacks remain the best interpretation of the archaeological and biblical evidence, not only because the Philistines are often portrayed in battle with Israel and Judah (1 Kgs 15:27; 16:15; 2 Chr 21:16–17; 26:6–7), but the restoration and expansion of Tel Miqne-Ekron following the destruction of Tel Beth-Shemesh reflects the very push-and-pull for power that marked life for Judahites and Philistines in the Sorek Valley during this time.

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[201] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 34.

[202] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 34.

[203] See Nadav Na'aman, "In Search of Reality behind the Account of the Philistine Assault on Ahaz in the Book of Chronicles," *Transeuphratène* 26 (2003): 47–63; and Ralph Klein, *2 Chronicles: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2012), 402–04.

The destruction of Tel Beth-Shemesh early in the eighth century BCE did not keep the site from eventually occupying an important role again for Judah. Under the reign of Hezekiah (729–687 BCE), Tel Beth-Shemesh transformed from "an administrative center on the border of Judah and Philistia (Level 3) to an unfortified agricultural/industrial town (level 2)" which specialized in olive oil production.[204] Tel Beth-Shemesh was able to operate unfortified because of the western expansion of Judah in the Sorek Valley under King Hezekiah, who eventually took over Timnah and made it the defensive Judahite border with the neighboring Philistine city of Ekron. The discovery of multiple *lmlk* ("[belonging] to the king") seals at Tel Beth-Shemesh and other sites in the region, including Azekah, Tell es-Safi/Gath, Tel Miqne-Ekron, Tel Batash, and Gezer, solidified the importance of the site in the cultural and economic exchange in the northern Shephelah toward the end of the eighth century BCE. In other words, Judah was once again the one on top.

2.4. Tel Batash (Timnah)

A similar history is shared by Tel Batash, better known in the Bible as the town of Timnah (Gen 38:12–14; Josh 15:10, 57; 19:43; Judg 14:1–2, 5; 2 Chr 28:18), where Samson found his foreign bride (Judg 14:1–4), tore apart a lion with his bare hands (Judg 14:5–6), celebrated his wedding (Judg 14:7–18), and initiated his acts of revenge against the Philistines (Judg 14:19–15:8).[205] Timnah is also the site of another biblical story (Gen

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[204] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Swinging on the 'Sorek Seesaw,'" 36.

[205] For more on Timnah in the Bible, see Amihai Mazar, *Timnah (Tel Batash) I: Stratigraphy and Architecture*, Qedem 37 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997), 6–9.

38) where an Israelite man (Judah) found himself in a precarious situation with a foreign woman (Tamar), possibly pointing to a shared tradition behind both texts.[206]

The town of Timnah is a low-lying site situated on the western side of the Sorek Valley with a small diameter of four hectors at its base and just over two hectors at its summit.[207] Its foundation appears to have been created from a pre-planned design, which can be seen in the precise geometric shape of its earthen ramparts corresponding to the four points on a compass.[208] Timnah is located seven kilometers northwest of Beth-Shemesh, five kilometers east of Ekron (Tel Miqne), eight kilometers south of Gezer, and near the Sorek brook, the primary source of water that consistently irrigates its fertile landscape (see Fig. 2.1).[209] These features were ideal for an ancient site even though it lacked a naturally defensive position. For this reason, the current lead excavator, Amihai Mazar, notes how Timnah "suffered from a lack of strategic position and natural topographic defense, and thus, it seems that the choice of the site for building an urban settlement was dictated first by the other advantages: land, water, and road."[210]

Indeed, this lack of natural defenses is likely the reason for Timnah's precarious history as a border town that variously found itself under the control of Canaanites, Philistines, Israelites, and Judahites during its nearly one-thousand-year existence,

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[206] Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between," 78–84; and idem, "Tamar, Delilah, and a Nameless Timnite: Women as (De)constructions of Social Landscape," in *Forget Not God's Benefits (Ps 103:2): Festschrift in Honor of Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM*, ed. Barbara Reid, CBQI 3 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2022), 60–76.

[207] Mazar, *Timnah (Tel Batash) I*, 3.

[208] Mazar, *Timnah (Tel Batash) I*, 3.

[209] Mazar, *Timnah (Tel Batash) I*, 1–3.

[210] Amihai Mazar, "Timnah, Tel Batash," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology*, ed. Daniel M. Master (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

beginning in the Middle Bronze Age (ca. seventeenth century BCE) and ending in the

Late Iron Age (seventh century BCE).[211] During that extended period of time, Timnah

fell prey to the same see-saw effect that plagued its neighboring town to the east, Beth

Shemesh, because of its liminal position between the competing polities of Canaan,

Philistia, Israel, and Judah. Thus, without natural defenses and limited fortifications,

Timnah came under the control of whichever group was dominant in the area. During the

Late Bronze period (ca. 1500–1200 BCE), this fell to the Canaanites, probably those

ruling from the large, fortified city of Gezer to the north.[212] At that time, Timnah may

have come under frequent attack by raiding *Habiru*, as was the case in Gezer, which can

be seen in the correspondences contained in the Amarna Letters (EA 267–71) between

the king of Gezer, Milkilu, and the Pharaohs of Egypt, Amenophis III and IV.[213]

With the arrival and settlement of the Sea Peoples during the transition from the

Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age (ca. 1150 BCE), Timnah was likely under the

control of the larger Philistine city-state to the west, Ekron (Tel Miqne), until its

destruction and reconstruction (Stratum IV) around the tenth century BCE, possibly by an

emerging Israelite monarchy in the region. At least two pieces of evidence suggest such

an occupation by Israel at that time. First, there is a short inscription of a Hebrew name

incised on a bowl rim ("[s]on of Hanan") found in Stratsum IV. As Mazar notes, this

inscription "might refer to a family of Hanan related also to the town Elon-beth-hanan,

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[211] Amihai Mazar and Nava Panitz-Cohen, eds., *Timnah (Tel Batash) III: The Finds from the Second Millennium BCE*, Qedem 45 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006), 324–29.

[212] George L. Kelm and Amihai Mazar, *Timnah – A Biblical City in the Sorek Valley* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 42.

[213] Kelm and Mazar, *Timnah*, 42. Williams Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

mentioned in Solomon's Second District (1 Kings 4:9)" as well as to a tenth century

inscription of the same name (i.e., "Hanan") found at nearby—and Israelite-controlled—

Beth Shemesh.[214] Second, there was a significant decrease in pork consumption in

Stratum IV, further supporting a transition from Philistine to Israelite occupation.[215]

Israel seems to have found itself atop the "Sorek Seesaw" at Timnah, then, during the

tenth century BCE.

Nevertheless, like Beth Shemesh, Timnah waxed and waned in prominence as it

appears to have changed hands back and forth between the Judahites and the Philistines

from the ninth to seventh centuries BCE, only to be destroyed twice, first by Sennacherib

and the Assyrians in 701 BCE and then by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians during

their invasions of the southern Levant between 605 and 603 BCE.[216] Furthermore, like

Beth Shemesh, the architecture, faunal remains, pottery, and material culture in general at

Timnah reflect a mixed occupancy and entangled culture of Canaanites, Philistines,

Israelites, and Judahites who used the site's easy access to water, fertile soil, and ideal

location for trade to and from the coast to harvest the land for producing olive oil, wine,

and wheat.[217] This entangled culture makes it difficult to distinguish between the

different polities at the site who were constantly in flux. In other words, as Mahri

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[214] Amihai Mazar and Nava Panitz-Cohen, eds., *Timnah (Tel Batash) II: The Pottery and Other Finds from the Iron Age II and Persian Periods: Second Final Report on the Excavations between 1977–1989*, Qedem 42 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2001), 278.

[215] Faust, "Pigs in Space," 281.

[216] Mazar and Panitz-Cohen, *Timnah (Tel Batash) II*, 273.

[217] Mazar and Panitz-Cohen, *Timnah (Tel Batash) III*, 158–61, 262–63, 295–310.

Leonard-Fleckman observes, "Timnah remained its own world; neither Judahite nor Philistine, it remained a liminal space from the perspective of those foreign to it."[218]

Remarkably, the cultural, political, and socio-religious picture that emerges from the archaeological data overlaps in many ways with the one drawn by the biblical authors of the Samson stories, especially in the core texts (Judg 14–15) that take place in and around the town of Timnah.[219] This can be seen in the depiction of the fluid borders between Israel and Philistia as Samson and his family traverses between Israelite and Philistine territory, circumcision as a distinguishing marker between the Israelites and the Philistines (Judg 14:3; 15:8), and the Philistine customs at Samson's wedding celebration in Timnah, including the drinking feasts (משתה) over seven days (Judg 14:10, 12, 17), the role of the companions (מרעים) accompanying Samson (14:11, 20; 15:2, 6), and the riddling (חידה) contest among his guests (Judg 14:12–19).[220] Even the particular crops (i.e., grapes, olives, and wheat) destroyed during Samson's escapade with the torched foxes (Judg 15:5) and the lion(ess) imagery found in both the archaeological and biblical record (Judg 14:5) overlap, thereby enhancing the plausibility of the regional struggle between the Israelites and Philistines portrayed in the Bible.[221]

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[218] Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between," 70.

[219] Gass, "Simson und die Philister."

[220] For more on the fluid borders in the northern Shephelah during the Iron Age, circumcision as an identity marker, and feasting practices among the Philistines, see Weitzman, "Crossing the Border"; Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between"; Thomas, "Samson Went Down"; Avraham Faust, "The Bible, Archaeology and the Practice of Circumcision in Israelite and Philistine Societies," *JBL* 134 (2015): 273–90; and Aren M. Maeir, "Aegean Feasting and Other Indo-European Elements in the Philistine Household," in *DAIS – The Aegean Feast: Proceedings of the 12th Annual International Aegean Conference, Melbourne, 25–29 March 2008*, ed. Louise A. Hitchcock, Robert Laffineur, and Janice Crowley, Aegaeum 29 (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 347–52.

[221] For more on the lion(ess) imagery in both the archaeological and biblical record, see Aren M. Maeir, "A Philistine 'Head Cup' (*Rhyton*) from Tell es-Safi/Gath," in *"I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient*

The similarity between the collective memories of biblical Israel and the material

witness of ancient Israel and Philistia continues in the later episodes of the Samson

stories where some of the cultic practices of the Israelites and Philistines are featured,

such as the "burnt offering" (עלה) of a young goat and grain by Manoah and his wife for

the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:15–23) and the "great sacrifice" (זבח־גדול) to Dagon by

the "lords" (סרנים) and people of Gaza (Judg 16:23–30) in what appears to be a victorious

celebration of religious feasting and worship of the God of Philistia over the God of

Israel (cf. 1 Sam 5; 1 Chr 10:10).[222] The burial of Samson by his family in the ancestral

tomb (Judg 16:31) also reflects the marked practice of intergenerational burial by ancient

Israelites during the Iron Age (cf. Judg 8:32).[223] Moreover, the final episode in the

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Times": Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday, Vol. 1, ed. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre de Miroschedji (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 335–45 [n. 5]; and the discussion of the "Lady of the Lions" (NIN-UR.MAH.MEŠ), who wrote to the pharaoh in Egypt from Tel Beth-Shemesh during the Late Bronze Age to complain about the violent Hapiru (Moran, *Amarna* Letters, 318–19), in Irit Ziffer, Shlomo Bunimovitz, and Zvi Lederman, "Divine or Human? An Intriguing Late Bronze Age Plaque Figurine from Tel Beth-Shemesh," *Ägypten und Levante* 19 (2009): 333–41.

[222] Gary A. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT)," *ABD* 5:870–86; Christian Eberhart, "A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar," *HTR* 97 (2004): 485–93; H. Craig Melchert, "Iron Age Luvian *tarrawann(i)-*," in *Over the Mountains and Far Away – Studies in Near Eastern History and Archaeology Presented to Mirjo Salvini on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, ed. Pavel S. Avetisyan, Roberto Dan, and Yervand H. Grekyan (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 337–45; Itmar Singer, "Towards the Image of Dagon the God of the Philistines," *Syria* 69 (1991): 431–50; Amihai Mazar, "The Temples and Cult of the Philistines," in *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment*, ed. Eliezer D. Oren, University Museum Monograph 108 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 213–32; Bradley L. Crowell, "The Development of Dagan: A Sketch," *JANER* 1 (2001): 32–83; Carl S. Ehrlich, "Philistine Religion: Text and Archaeology," *Scripta Mediterranea* 27–28 (2006–2007): 33–52; Jeffrey P. Emanuel, "'Dagon Our God': Iron I Philistine Cult in Text and Archaeology," *JANER* 16 (2016): 22–66; and Maura Sala, "Beyond Dagon: Resilience and Entanglement of Canaanite Backgrounds in Sacred Buildings and Cult Practices of Early Iron Age Philistia," in *Tell it in Gath. Studies in the History and Archaeology of Israel. Essays in Honor of Aren M. Maeir on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Itzhaq Shai et al., ÄAT 90 (Münster: Zaphon, 2018), 352–74.

[223] Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, JSOTSup 123 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); idem, "Resurrecting the Iron I Dead," *IEJ* 54 (2004): 77–91; Avraham Faust, "Mortuary Practices, Society and Ideology: The Lack of Highland Iron Age I Burials in Context," *IEJ* 54 (2004): 174–190; and Rachel Nabulsi, *Death and Burial in Iron Age Israel, Aram, and Phoenicia* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), 11–62.

Samson stories is full of allusions to Mesopotamian language and motifs, including

Samson's escapade with the enigmatic Delilah (Judg 16:4–20), tragic blinding and

enslavement by the Philistines (Judg 16:21), and triumphal destruction of the temple of

Dagon (Judg 16:22–31).[224]

Despite the objections from Finkelstein and others, there appears to be more than

just "seeds of early tales" in the Samson stories and their depiction of life in the northern

Shephelah during the Early Iron Age. Each of these overlapping issues in the

archaeological, biblical, and comparative accounts during the Iron Age will be explored

in greater detail below during the diachronic and synchronic analysis of Judg 14–15

(Chapter Three), Judg 16 (Chapter Four), and Judg 13 (Chapter Five). The socio-

historical contexts in which these texts were likely composed and edited by scribes, that

is, during the Neo-Assyrian (Judg 14–15), Neo-Babylonian (Judg 16), and Persian

periods (Judg 13), will also be examined to determine to what degree they shaped the

evolution of the Samson stories. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the archaeological

and biblical evidence must be examined on their own terms before a synthesis can be

made. In other words, the similarities must not overshadow the differences and thereby

subjugate *ancient* Israel to *biblical* Israel. As Bloch-Smith notes:

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[224] Karel van der Toorn, "Judges XVI 21 In the Light of the Akkadian Sources," *VT* 36 (1986): 248–53; Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 169–97; and Baker, *Hallow Men*, 157–215.

Archaeology offers an independent witness to and alternative perspective on ancient Israel, and the more perspectives, the better our chance of approximating historical reality. Viewing the archaeological and biblical pictures side by side shows convergences and differences. In addition, the archaeological picture fills in elements either omitted or sketchily drawn in the biblical portrait. The chronological schema afforded by archaeology assists in dating the composition of and later additions to biblical texts. Archaeology also provides a tangible experience of the world of ancient Israel, grounding and enlivening the Israelites and their neighbors with the physical remnants of their everyday lives. Through this engagement with the realia of ancient Israel, the significance of the ancient context, and, by extension, the modern context, comes to the fore in interpreting biblical texts.[225]

What then are some of the differences between the archaeological and biblical evidence? Furthermore, what can be gleaned historically from a text that is largely folkloric and mythical? Regarding the first question, one of the most significant differences is the identification of Dagon as the national deity of the Philistines (Judg 16:23–30). Regarding the second question, the idea of Samson as the Danite deliverer (Judg 13:5) and judge (Judg 13:1; 15:20; 16:31) of all Israel is aided and hindered by the archaeological, biblical, and comparative evidence. These questions will be addressed here in order to delineate between the various historical contexts in which the Samson stories are presented (Iron Age I) and from which they began to emerge (Iron Age II).

2.5. Dagon

According to the archaeological record and comparative texts from the ancient Near East, there is no evidence for the worship of Dagon in Philistia. That association entirely lies within the realm of the biblical authors (Judg 16:21–30; 1 Sam 5:1–7; 1 Chr 10:8–10; 1 Macc 10:82–85; 11:4). This is surprising since Dagon—where he is known as Dagan (ᵈ*da-gan* or ᵈ*da-ga-an*)—is a prominent deity in the pantheon of other Middle

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[225] Bloch-Smith, "Archaeology," 25.

Euphrates or Northwest Semitic kingdoms, such as Ebla, Mari, Emar, and Ugarit.[226] The

veneration of Dagan dates back to at least the third millennium BCE and ranges from the

Euphrates to the Levantine coast at such prominent places as Mari (ca. 2500 BCE) and

Ebla (ca. 2300 BCE) where he served as the "Father of the gods" (*abi ilī*) in the Syrian

pantheon.[227] Prominent cult sites for Dagan were located across the middle Euphrates

region at the cities of Mari, Tuttul, and Terqa, and theophoric elements featuring his

namesake (e.g., Dagan-rabi, Dagan-zimrati, Iassil-Dagan, Laḫun-Dagan, Etel-pī-Dagan,

Naḫmum-Dagan, Ubar-Dagan and Warad-Dagan) were common throughout

Mesopotamia.[228] The meaning behind Dagon's name is debated by scholars, but it is most

often linked etymologically with the root word for grain (*dgn*) in Ugaritic, Phoenician,

and Hebrew, a connection that was made at least as early as the second century CE by

Philo Byblos in his *Phoenician History*.[229] In the divine family tree at Ugarit, Dagan is

the father of Ba'al and second in command only to the high god El. Despite this primary

position among the gods, Dagan does not feature prominently in the mythological texts at

Ugarit.[230] In some older traditions, "the Lord of Tuttul" ([d]BE *du-du li*), one of Dagan's

many epithets, is paired with Šalaš, a mother goddess whose symbol was a barley stalk,

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[226] For a comprehensive study of Dagan, see Lluís Feliu, *The God Dagan in Bronze Age Syria*, CHANE 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[227] Singer, "Towards an Image," 437; Crowell, "Development of Dagan," 37–45; and Feliu, *The God Dagan*, 7–276.

[228] Singer, "Towards the Image," 437; Crowell, "Development of Dagan," 34–40, 44, 55–57, 66; Feliu, *The God Dagan*, XII, 94–134; and Emanuel, "'Dagon our God,'" 32–33.

[229] Singer, "Towards the Image," 433, 439, 443; Crowell, "Development of Dagan," 33–34; Feliu, *The God Dagan*, 278–87; and Emanuel, "'Dagon our God,'" 33–34.

[230] Singer, "Towards the Image," 437; Crowell, "Development of Dagan," 63–65; Feliu, *The God Dagan*, 264–66, 287–95; and Emmanuel, "'Dagon our God,'" 32, 48.

and at other times with Išhara, a goddess with many associations, including divination, love, and war, whose known symbols were the snake (Old Babylonian) and the scorpion (Middle Babylonian).[231] Some scholars have designated Dagan as an underworld deity, not only because of his association with Enlil, but his connection to the *pagrā'um* offerings at Mari and Ugarit, a mourning ceremony in which a corpse was burnt and offered to Dagan, who is referred to as *bēl pagrê* ("lord of the funerary offerings" or "lord of sacrificial victims"), in honor of the dead person.[232]

With this extensive background across Mesopotamia and the Levant, it is conceivable why Dagon would be featured by the biblical authors as the national deity of the Philistines. But according to the archaeological record, particularly around the thoroughly excavated site of Ashdod, the Philistines appear to have primarily worshiped a female deity, a goddess whom scholars conveniently refer to as "Ashdoda," and Dagon is nowhere to be found.[233] The Ashdoda are seated female terracotta figurines that have been discovered at Ashdod—nearly forty in total including an intact figurine—and in fragmentary form at multiple Philistine sites like Tel Miqne, Tell es-Safi/Gath, and Tell Qasile, often in domestic contexts.[234] The Ashdoda are distinct from other cultic

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[231] Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: The British Museum Press, 1992), 56, 110, 172–73; Doris Prechel, *Die Göttin Išhara: Ein Beitrag zur altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte*, ALASP 11 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996); and Feliu, *The God Dagan*, 239–46, 288–93.

[232] John F. Healey, "The Underworld Character of the God Dagan," *JNSL* 5 (1977): 43–51; and Feliu, *The God Dagan*, 70–73, 306.

[233] Amihai Mazar, "Temples and Cult," 223–24; Ehrlich, "Philistine Religion," 39–40; Anthony Russell, "Deconstructing Ashdoda: Migration, Hybridisation, and the Philistine Identity," *BABESCH* 84 (2009): 1–15; and Sala, "Beyond Dagon," 364–65.

[234] Ehrlich, "Philistine Religion," 39–44; Russell, "Deconstructing Ashdoda"; and Sala, "Beyond Dagon," 364.

paraphernalia in the Levant and share many features with seated goddesses from

Mycenae and Cyprus, thereby strengthening the scholarly consensus that the Philistines

derived from an ancient Aegean culture.[235]

Why then did the biblical authors present the male god Dagon and not the female

god Ashdoda as the main deity of the Philistines? Several theories have been proposed by

archeologists and biblical scholars. One of the original excavators of Ashdod, Moshe

Dothan, suggested that the Philistines had a short interval during the twelfth century BCE

in which they switched from worshipping Dagon to Ashdoda, their pre-Canaanite Aegean

goddess, however, this is unlikely since there is no evidence outside of the Bible for

Dagon in Canaan before or after this supposed interval.[236] Itmar Singer has proposed that

the Philistines adopted Dagon from Syria during their migration to the Levantine coast

and that the Ashdoda represent a syncretism of Dagon with the Philistines' older native

mother goddess of Aegean-Anatolian origins.[237] By contrast, Bradley Crowell and Jeffrey

Emanuel have questioned whether Dagon was ever a deity worshipped by the Philistines

during the Iron Age given the complete lack of archaeological evidence and the late dates

now commonly assigned to the composition of the biblical texts that feature Dagon,

including those from the DH (Judg 16:21–30; 1 Sam 5:1–7). Instead, they argue that

Dagon, an otherwise unknown Northwest Semitic god in Israel, was used by the biblical

authors during the exile for their own ideological and literary purposes, namely pitting

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[235] Assaf Yasur-Landau, "The Mother(s) of All Philistines: Aegean Enthroned Deities of the 12th–11th Century Philistia," in *Potnia: Deities and Religion in the Aegean Bronze Age*, ed. Robert Laffineur and Robin Hägg, Aegaeum 22 (Liège, Belgium: Université de Liège, 2001), 329–43.

[236] Singer, "Towards the Image," 440–41.

[237] Singer, "Towards the Image," 436–50.

the God of Israel (Yhwh) over against the supposed God of Philistia (Dagon).[238] Most recently, current finds from Tell es-Safi/Gath and renewed analysis of cultic practices and structures across Philistine sites reveal entangled cultures of Aegean, Canaanite, and Philistine derivation, leading many scholars to conclude that a hybridization of cultic practices, symbols, and traditions were most likely the norm in Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Philistia.[239] Despite these new excavations and renewed interpretations of the archaeological and textual data, there is still no evidence for the worship of Dagon by Philistines outside of the Bible, while the presence of female deities in the Philistine pantheon and the worship of multiple goddesses at once (e.g., Asherah and Astarte-Ashtoreth) appear to be the cultic reality for Iron Age Philistia.[240]

The possible reasons why the biblical authors chose this relatively obscure deity to be the high god of the Philistines will be explored in greater detail below during the textual analysis of Judg 16 (Chapter Four) in which Dagon features. Another element to be examined here in the Samson stories and in the book of Judges in general is the system of governance depicted elsewhere in the Bible as "in the days when the judges ruled" (בימי שפט השפטים) (Ruth 1:1). In particular, Samson's role as the Danite judge over all Israel. As mentioned above, this world imagined in the book of Judges is both aided and hindered by the archaeological, biblical, and comparative evidence, blurring the line between historical reality and narrative fiction.

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[238] Crowell, "Development of Dagon," 50–54; and Emanuel, "Dagon our God," 52–55.

[239] Russell, "Deconstructing Ashdoda"; and Sala, "Beyond Dagon," 364–67.

[240] Sala, "Beyond Dagon," 364–65.

2.6. Mari and the Bible

The Deuteronomistic framework that structures the Samson stories and the cyclical formula used throughout the book of Judges narrate a time in which a divinely appointed leader from each tribe "delivers" (ישע) and/or "judges" (שפט) Israel in her time of need.[241] The various responsibilities assumed by these Israelite deliverers and/or judges include, among other things, leading military campaigns (Judg 3:9–10; 16–30; 4:6–10; 6:33–35; 7; 8:10–17; 11:4–11; 12:1–6), engaging in diplomacy (Judg 3:15; 8:1–3; 11:12–28) and divination (Judg 3:19, 26; 4:4–5; 6:36–40), maintaining cultic practices (Judg 6:25–32; 8:22–27), resolving border disputes (Judg 12:1–6), and single-handedly killing Philistines (Judg 3:31; 14:19; 15:6–8, 14–16; 16:30). The roles for the שפטים expand even further when one looks outside the book of Judges (cf. Exod 18:13–27; Num 25:1–5; Deut 1:9–18; 16:18–20; 1 Sam 8:1–3; 1 Chr 17:9–10; 2 Chr 19:4–7).

These various responsibilities and the general system of governance within which they took place has precedent in other tribal societies across the ancient Near East, especially during what Dominique Charpin calls the *période amorrite* ("Amorite Period").[242] One such place was Mari, an ancient Semitic city in the middle Euphrates region that was occupied from the early third millennium BCE until its destruction by

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[241] The cycle includes one or more of the following features: First, Israel disobeys Yhwh and turns to foreign gods (Judg 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Second, Yhwh becomes angry and punishes the Israelites by delivering them into the hand of a foreign oppressor (Judg 2:14, 20; 3:8; 4:2; 6:1; 10:7; 13:1). Third, after multiple years under oppression, the Israelites repent and cry out to Yhwh for deliverance (Judg 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10). Fourth, Yhwh selects a deliverer to rescue the people from their oppression (Judg 3:30; 8:28; 11:33; 13:5). Fifth, after the deliverer defeats the enemies of Israel, there is a period of peace in the land (Judg 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28). For more on the cyclical formula and structure in the book of Judges, see Frolov, *Judges*, 16–29.

[242] Dominique Charpin, "Histoire politique du Proche-Orient Ammorite (2002–1595)," in *Mesopotamien. Die altbabylonische Zeit*, ed. Dominique Charpin, Dietz O. Edzard, and Marten Stol, OBO 160 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 23–480.

King Hammurabi of Babylon in 1760 BCE. The discovery of a large cache of cuneiform

texts at the palace complex of King Zimri-Lim from Mari's final period of occupation has

provided scholars with a detailed window into the life of Mari and its neighbors.[243] This

collection of texts gives an especially rich insight into the social and political

machinations of Mari because many of the texts are personal correspondences shared by

the king and his various allies, enemies, and vassals.[244] Given the chronological and

geographical proximity to the biblical stories of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis and

the more distant period of tribal Israel in the books of Joshua and Judges, scholars have

used the texts from Mari to better understand the ways in which biblical traditions reflect

some of the ideas and practices of their Amorite neighbors to the north.[245]

During the reign of King Zimri-Lim, regional governors (*šāpiṭum*) and tribal

chiefs (*merḫûms*) represented their territories (*mātum*) on behalf of their king (*sarrum*).

Zimri-Lim is identified as the king of Mari and of the land of the Ḫana ("tent-dwellers").

The two major groups of the Ḫana were the northern Sim'alites ("sons of the left") and

the southern Yamina ("sons of the right"), which some scholars argue have a distant and

indirect link to the Israelite tribe of Benjamin.[246] The Ḫana were pastoralists, who grazed

and raised livestock in the pastures of Mari. Their families organized themselves into

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[243] Wolfgang Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003); Jack M. Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters* (Winona Lake, IN: 2014).

[244] Daniel E. Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors: Mari and Early Collective Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24–103.

[245] Jean-Marie Durand, "Réalités Amorrites et traditions bibliques," *RA* 92 (1998): 3–39; Daniel E. Fleming, "Mari and the Possibilities of Biblical Memory," *RA* 92 (1998): 41–78; Jack M. Sasson, "About 'Mari and the Bible.'" *RA* 92 (1998): 97–123; and Sophie Lafont, "Le roi, le juge et l'étranger a Mari et dans le Bible," *RA* 92 (1998): 161–81.

[246] Fleming, "Mari and the Possibilities."

larger clans or tribal units (*alum*), which were run by tribal chiefs who led military campaigns, organized tribal members, negotiated disputes with neighboring tribes, and reported to the king on issues requiring royal approval or support.[247] Another leadership title among the Ḫana and elsewhere in Mari is the *sugāgum*, a somewhat catchall term for tribal leadership in Mari, since it is used both for the king and for lower-level leaders.[248] These different titles and types of leadership reflect the fluidity and connectiveness of the social organization at Mari during the early second millennium BCE. Thus, as Daniel Fleming notes, "under king Zimri-Lim, the categories commonly isolated as 'tribe' and 'state,' along with 'nomad,' and 'pastoralist,' and the like, came together in a single social web."[249]

The *merḫûms* and *šāpiṭum* function in many ways to the שפטים in the book of Judges and elsewhere in the Bible. As mentioned above, the typical English translation of שפט as "judge" can be misleading, since apart from Deborah (Judg 4:4–5) the שפטים do very little judging, at least in the book that bears their name, and are better understood as local leaders who function similarly to the *merḫûms* and *šāpiṭum* in Mari, exercising authority and leadership over their tribal territories by carrying out a variety of responsibilities.[250] Because of the similar socio-political structure, relatively close proximity in time and space, and possible shared ancestry, some scholars, such as André

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[247] Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors*, 63–76; Heimpel, *Letters to the King*, 36; and Sasson, *From the Mari Archives*, 137.

[248] Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors*, 63–76.

[249] Daniel E. Fleming, "Kingship of City and Tribe Conjoined: Zimri-Lim at Mari," in *Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East – Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jeffrey Szuchman, Oriental Institute Seminars 5 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2009), 228.

[250] LaFont, "Le roi, le juge," 165–66.

Lemaire, have argued that tribal Israel may have emerged out of a coalition of "Bene Israel" from Egypt and "Bene Jacob" from Aramaic territory.[251] Furthermore, this possible—albeit distant—genetic link may explain why it is that the worlds revealed in the archives of Mari and those in the Bible share many of the same sensibilities.[252]

However, there is over a thousand years between the texts from Mari (ca. eighteenth century) and those from Israel and Judah (eighth century BCE onward), requiring something to fill in the gap, such as the writings at Ugarit, Amarna, or Emar, to provide what Jack Sasson calls the "Amorite bridge."[253] Moreover, there are some notable differences between what we find in the texts at Mari and those from the Bible. In the book of Judges, for example, the tribal leaders of Israel were appointed by God rather than a king and acted primarily in a military—not to mention miraculous—capacity. Moreover, the folkloric nature of these texts in general and the mythical elements in the Samson stories in particular, including his possible divine birth (Judg 13:2–14), extraordinary feats of strength (Judg 14:5–6; 16:3; 28–30), and ability to slaughter hordes of Philistines while possessed by the divine spirit (Judg 14:19; 15:14–17), are different than the largely quotidian political correspondence in the texts at Mari. The Samson stories and the biblical narratives in general are perhaps better described as "historicized

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[251] André Lemaire, "Mari, the Bible, and the Northwest Semitic World," *The Biblical Archeologist* 47 (1984): 107.

[252] As Sasson notes, "Mari vassals and ambassadors, we have discovered, can be exceptionally garrulous, their prose matching well with what we find in biblical narratives, both sharing lively phrasing, vivid pacing, and fine sense of structure. I truly believe that in this shared feeling for words we bring Mari and the Bible to some of their closest proximities." Jack M. Sasson, "Mari and the Holy Grail," in *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, ed. Steven W. Holloway (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006), 193.

[253] Sasson, "About 'Mari and the Bible'," 99. For such a bridge, see Durand, "Réalités Amorrites."

prose fiction," to borrow a phrase from Robert Alter.[254] Still, many of the textual

traditions in the Bible reflect authentic knowledge of Northwest Semitic life in the second

millennium BCE, especially when one compares the combined responsibilities of the

merḫûms and *šāpiṭum* at Mari with those of the שפטים in the book of Judges. Such a

combination is even suggested by Sasson when he considers the usefulness of Mari for

better understanding the biblical judges:

> Once promising as a resource for shedding light on the biblical institution
> were the Mari archives, with their storehouse of information on the
> activities of the *šāpiṭum* and the office he held, the *šāpiṭūtum*. What made
> the documentation especially interesting is that it contained enormous
> details on the many individuals who held such offices, always as
> functionaries of the king, giving us a richer profile for the personalities
> and the posts they occupied. The dossier of such 'governors' (our
> conventional name for their office) has them working for the palace,
> caring for fields and canals, policing and spying in and out of their area,
> attending to the local shrines, and resolving personal and tribal disputes.
> Taking the initiative was not their forte, so only superficially do they
> function as do our 'judges.' To approximate the authority of the Hebrew
> *šōfēṭ*, we would need to attach to the Mari *šāpiṭum* the power attributed to
> the *merḫûm*, a military leader of the tribal elements in the king's army.[255]

Yet, even after using the texts from Mari to better understand the world imagined

in the book of Judges, determining the tribe(s) to which Samson belongs is not altogether

clear, as it appears to evolve alongside the stories themselves. Just like the fluctuating

territories between Zorah and Eshtaol that Samson crisscrosses at will, his own identity is

in flux. Samson's character is betwixt and between, or what Mobley describes as his

liminality.[256] Thus, the Samson stories take place in a variety of Iron Age Israelite,

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[254] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and upd. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 25–54.

[255] Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 186–87.

[256] Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*, 1–36. See, also, Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between," 78–82.

Judahite, and Philistine cities and towns.[257] These include Zorah (13:2, 25; 16:31),

Eshtaol (13:25; 16:31), Mahaneh-dan (13:25), Timnah (14:1, 2, 5), Ashkelon (14:19),

Etam (15:8, 11), Judah (15:9), Lehi (15:9, 14, 19), Ramat-lehi (15:17), En-hakkore

(15:19), Gaza (16:1, 21), Hebron (16:3), and the valley of Sorek (16:4). Tribal lists in the

book of Joshua only increase the political complexity of this area, since Beth-Shemesh,

Eshtaol, and Zorah sometimes are assigned to Dan (Josh 19:41) and sometimes to Judah

(Josh 15:13; 21:16).[258] Determining when these territories are under Israelite, Judahite, or

Philistine control is also unclear between the different accounts in the DH (cf. Josh 15:10,

13; 19:22, 38, 41; 21:16; Judg 1:33; 13:2, 25; 16:31; 18:2, 8, 11; 1 Sam 6:9, 12, 13, 15,

19–20; 1 Kgs 4:9; 14:11, 13).[259]

These conflicting geographical reports reveal the different concerns of the scribes

composing and editing the books of Joshua and Judges.[260] The discrepancies are likely

because scribes were writing at much later periods than the realities presented in their

works. Furthermore, biblical texts, like most literature, are biased works with

perspectives—especially of enemies, whether real or imagined—that provide only one

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[257] The primary difference between a city (עיר) and a town or village (חצר) in ancient Israel is that the city was a permanent settlement surrounded by a fortified wall, while the village was a less permanent settlement without a defensive wall and dependent upon the protection and support of a larger, fortified city. For example, the town or village of Timnah (Tel Batash) was likely one of the "daughter" settlements to its "mother" city Ekron (Tel Miqne) for much of its history (Josh 15:45). For more on the differences between cities and villages in ancient Israel, see Volkmar Fritz, *The City in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

[258] Damien Noël, "Josué: De la géographie à l'histoire, l'impossible conquête," in *The Book of Joshua*, ed. Edward Noort, BETL 250 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 315–46; and Yigal Levin, "Conquered and Unconquered: Reality and Historiography in the Geography of Joshua," in *The Book of Joshua*, ed. Edward Noort, BETL 250 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 361–70.

[259] For more on the role played by the tribe of Dan in the DH, see Mark W. Bartusch, *Understanding Dan – An Exegetical Study of a Biblical City, Tribe and Ancestor*, JSOTSup 379 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 66–75, 77–220.

[260] Levin, "Conquered and Unconquered," 368–70.

side of the story.[261] There are no Philistine texts describing their views of Israel and Judah, thereby forcing scholars to rely upon archaeology and comparative texts to expand their perspectives and understanding. The reasons why the Philistines are presented as such will be explored below when the compositional history of the Samson stories is situated within its later historical setting and time, that is, during the Neo-Assyrian (Judg 14–15), Neo-Babylonian (Judg 16), and Persian periods (Judg 13).

Regarding Samson's tribal identity and the diachronic development of the stories, one wonders whether Samson is a Danite (Judg 13:2, 25), an Israelite (Judg 13:5; 14:4, 15:20; 16:31), or a Judahite (Judg 15:9–13). It will be argued below that this part of Samson's identity is also liminal and evolves alongside the rest of the Samson stories in conjunction with the shifting socio-historical contexts of the biblical authors.

2.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, the Samson stories were situated within the larger historical context of Canaan during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. It was shown how ancient Israel and Philistia were part of an entangled culture of Canaanites, Philistines, and Israelites who shared many of the same characteristics and practices. By examining the archaeological data of two excavated sites in the northern Shephelah that were variously occupied by Philistines, Israelites, and Judahites, it was shown how the region of the Sorek Valley fell prey to a "seesaw effect" in which territorial control was determined by whichever group was dominant in the area. The proximity and political instability of the people groups living in that region meant that

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[261] Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 25–44.

there was significant cultural and social exchange, often blurring the lines between the Philistines, Israelites, and Judahites.

It was then shown how the reality of *ancient* Israel in the archaeological record is reflected in the world of *biblical* Israel in the Samson stories in a variety of ways. Despite these similarities, differences were displayed and examined as well. In particular, the identification of Dagon as the national deity of the Philistines and Samson as the Danite judge over all Israel. It was shown how there is no archaeological evidence for the worship of Dagon by the Philistines, but that they primarily worshipped female deities, likely of ancient Aegean origins. Lastly, Samson's role as a שפט and the system of governance in which the שפטים operated were compared with the socio-political life of the middle Euphrates kingdom of Mari during the reign of King Zimri-Lim toward the end of the Middle Bronze Age (eighteenth century BCE). Some of the significant differences in genre between the biblical texts and those examined at Mari were demonstrated, however, it was also shown how many of the traditions in the Bible reflect authentic knowledge of Northwest Semitic life in the second millennium BCE, especially when the leadership responsibilities of the *merḫûms* and *šāpiṭum* at Mari were combined and compared with those of the שפטים in the book of Judges.

Thus, in response to scholars who argue that the Samson stories are only a late construct composed during the postexilic or Hellenistic period, it was shown how they more likely evolved over time and are embedded with ancient memories and traditions that hark back to "the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1) and "there was no king in Israel" (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Indeed, as the Samson stories evolved and grew over time so did the character of Samson himself, from a fierce Israelite warrior (Judg

14–15) to a tragic Judahite leader (Judg 16) to a consecrated Nazirite from the clan of Dan under the watchful eyes Yhwh (Judg 13). It will be shown how that growth most likely began in the seventh century BCE when Judah found itself under Neo-Assyrian domination, a reality reflected in the heroic tales of Samson in Judg 14–15, to which we now turn. Yet, like all journeys, one must start at the beginning to know where one is going, and for Samson that adventure—or perhaps better *misadventure*—begins on the road to Timnah.

CHAPTER THREE:

SAMSON FIGHTS FOR ISRAEL (JUDGES 14–15)

3.1. Introduction

Biblical scholars have long argued that Judg 14–15 contain the oldest oral and literary traditions in the Samson stories.[262] The narratives are not only self-contained but include a number of features distinct from those found in Judg 13 and 16.[263] In these core texts, Samson is a heroic warrior fighting alone against Philistines, who are portrayed as the powerful overlords of Israel during that time (Judg 14:4; 15:11).[264] Regardless of this struggle, Samson is attracted to a Philistine woman from Timnah, whom he is determined to marry (Judg 14:1–2), despite the opposition of his Israelite parents (Judg 14:3) and the apprehension (Judg 14:11) and suspicion (Judg 14:15) of her kinfolk. The conflict portrayed by the biblical authors between these Israelite *insiders* and Philistine *outsiders* begins at Samson's wedding through a contest of riddles (חידות) (Judg 14:10–18) and culminates in a series of violent actions and reactions (Judg 14:19; 15:1–19) in which the underdog Samson gets the better of the mighty Philistines.

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[262] See, for example, Gese, "ältere Simsonüberlieferung"; Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam"; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 190–332; Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 41–44; Kratz, *Composition*, 205; Groß, *Richter*, 89–90, 657–60; and Knauf, *Richter*, 16–17, 23–25. On the other hand, Gunkel considered Judg 13:25, 16:1–3, and 16:4–30 even older oral traditions of *Märchen* ("folk tales") that predated the combined *Sagen* ("sagas") of Judg 14:1–15:17 (Gunkel, "Simson," 46–48).

[263] Thus, after carefully analyzing the genre and structure of the Samson stories, Serge Frolov concludes "Judg 13:2–16:31 is a conglomerate of largely self-contained stories sharing a common framework; in other words, it is a narrative series." Frolov, *Judges*, 256.

[264] For the Samson stories as originally a hero saga, see Rüdiger Bartelmus, *Heroentum in Israel und seiner Umwelt: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Gen. 6, 1–4 und verwandten Texten im Alten Testament und der altorientalischen Literatur*, ATANT 65 (Zurich: TVZ, 1979), 79–111; Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*; and Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero."

It is no wonder that this story of a strongman who pokes his thumb in the eye of a powerful adversary has been so popular throughout its reception history, especially among hearers and readers in oppressive contexts, including, as argued here, those living in Judah under Neo-Assyrian suzerainty during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.[265] For that reason, Susan Niditch concludes that a "close study of the tale of Samson, its content, and its structures has revealed Israelite versions of traditional and cross culturally evidenced narrative *topoi*. The overriding theme and concern of these *topoi*, whether Samson be viewed as culture hero, trickster, or bandit, is the marginal's confrontation with oppressive authority, more specifically with Israel's dealings with its Philistine enemies."[266] How might these narrative *topoi* fit within the larger DH?

The Deuteronomistic features in these core texts, such as the leitmotif of sight (Judg 14:1–3), a deep concern about exogamy (Judg 14:3), the spirit of Yhwh rushing (צלח) upon a prominent leader of Israel (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), the Deuteronomistic phrase "until this day" (Judg 15:19), and the summary of the judge's reign (Judg 15:20) are part and parcel of the textual development of the book of Judges and the DH, which themselves likely emerged from difficult socio-political contexts and memorialize Israel's tumultuous entry and exit from the promised land (Deut 1:8).[267] Determining

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[265] See, for example, how Samson became an icon for African Americans challenging racial oppression in the United States in Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, *Black Samson: The Untold Story of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). For the Samson stories as a reaction to Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian hegemony, see Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 169–97; and Baker, *Hallow Men*, 157–215.

[266] Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," 624.

[267] For more on the Deuteronomistic features in the Samson stories, see Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists." For the difficult socio-political contexts from which the DH emerged, see Knoppers, "History as Confession?"; idem, "History and Historiography"; and idem, "From Israel to Judah."

which elements were added by Deuteronomistic scribes and which were older oral or textual traditions about Samson is one of the issues explored below. One must therefore identify the features that distinguish the earlier core texts (Judg 14–15) from the beginning (Judg 13) and ending (Judg 16) of the Samson stories that were likely added by Deuteronomistic (Judg 16) and then Priestly (Judg 13) scribes. Fortunately, several distinguishing features in the language used and narratives told in these earlier core texts are significantly different from those likely scribal additions and allow for a clearer delineation.

3.2. Distinguishing Features of Judges 14–15

The first is the use of the verb צלח ("to rush") three times in the Qal form to describe the frenetic outpouring of "the spirit of Yhwh" (רוח יהוה) upon Samson (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14).[268] The only other time the spirit of Yhwh explicitly interacts with Samson is when the narrator describes how the spirit begins to "impel" or "stir" (פָּעַם) Samson in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg 13:25). Pointed differently (פַּעַם), the root (פעם) is a noun for a simple beat, such as a hammer striking an anvil or the stomping of a foot. This rhythmic pounding is fitting given Samson's martial rage every time the spirit of Yhwh is thrust upon him as he is driven into action (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14). Furthermore, פַּעַם is used repeatedly throughout the Samson stories in direct speech, drawing attention to hearers or readers of the action about to unfold. It is used, for example, just before Samson burns down the fields of the Philistines when he declares "*this time* (הפעם), when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame" (Judg 15:3); and when an exhausted Delilah decries to Samson "you have mocked me *three*

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[268] For the use of צלח in biblical literature, see J. Hausman, "צָלַח *ṣālaḥ*," *TDOT* XII:382–85.

times (שלש פעמים)" (Judg 16:15) or informs the Philistine lords "*this time* (הפעם) come up, for he has told his whole secret to me" (Judg 16:18); and when a soon-to-be-defeated Samson declares "I will go out *as at other times* (כפעם בפעם) and shake myself free" (Judg 16:20) or after a defeated Samson prays to Yhwh, "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only *this once* (הפעם הזה)" (Judg 16:28).

Alter assigns considerable importance to the use of פעם by the authors of the Samson stories, who he believes used the verb and related noun as a type of three-plus-one structuring device common in biblical and folkloric literature.[269] Hence, Alter describes, rather dramatically, its use in the Samson stories as follows:

> The usual verb for the descent of the spirit on a judge—a verb which in fact will be applied to Samson at 14:19—is *ṣālaḥ*. Only here do we have the verb *pā'ēm*, and, indeed, only here in the entire Bible is that verb used in a transitive (*pī'ēl*) form. The basic meaning of the root, from a term for "foot," is to stamp or pound (thus the sundry modern translations that render it here as "to move" are rather weak). Two common nouns associated with the root are *pa'am*, time (because times were counted by a stamping of the foot), and *pa'amôn*, bell. Samson, then, is not a judge who is merely taken possession of by the spirit of the Lord but a man in whom it pounds, like the clapper of a bell, a man driven by inward energy in a series of pulsating motions, like the movements of violence, like sexuality itself. Instructively, the only other times that the root *pā'am* occurs in the Bible as a verb are to indicate the inner turmoil of a dreamer waking from a disturbing dream—first Pharaoh (Gen 41:8) and then, with a likely allusion to the earlier text in Genesis, Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:1 and 3). In both instances the verb is used in a passive form in conjunction with "spirit" ("and his spirit was troubled"). The author of the Samson story, then, is almost certainly playing on a familiar locution. Here it is not the character's spirit or inward state that is troubled (*wattippā'ēm*) or churned up, but the spirit of the Lord that pounds in him, impels him. Perhaps such access to the spirit as is vouchsafed to a figure like Samson can be nothing but inner unrest, the explosive or spasmodic enactment of dark dreams of desire and violence leading to catastrophe.[270]

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[269] Alter, "Samson without Folklore," 47–55.

[270] Alter, "Samson without Folklore," 49.

What about the use of the verb צלח to describe the spirit of Yhwh rushing upon

Samson in these core texts (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14)? Intriguingly, the verb צלח is used this

way in the Qal form only in other Deuteronomistic texts and only with other prominent

leaders in Israel, specifically Israel's first and second kings, Saul and David (1 Sam 10:6,

10; 11:6; 16:13; 18:10).[271] For Saul, it is when the "spirit of God" (רוח אלהים) rushes upon

him during a prophetic frenzy on his way to Gibeah (1 Sam 10:10)—as predicted by

Samuel (1 Sam 10:6)—and after he is told of the Ammonite siege of Jabash-Gilead (1

Sam 11:6). The latter even prompts Saul to rally the troops by sending the body parts of

slaughtered oxen throughout Israel (1 Sam 11:7; cf. Judg 19:29–30). Furthermore, like

Samson, whose "anger burned" (ויחר אפו) after the spirit of Yhwh rushed upon him while

fighting against an enemy (Judg 14:19), Saul's "anger burned" (ויחר אפו) after the same

spirit rushed upon him while fighting against an enemy (1 Sam 11:6).[272] These narrative

features in the Samson and Saul stories resemble related aspects in the meaning of צלח,

that is, "to burn" and "to rush," which can be found in other biblical texts (cf. Amos 5:6)

and has a lexical relationship to other Semitic languages.[273] For David, on the other hand,

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[271] According to Hausmann, "Compared to the passages in the hiphil with their direct and indirect references to Yahweh or God, those using the qal, while not necessarily more concrete, are perhaps semantically somewhat reduced and may even include those problem passages mentioned above (Am. 5:6; 2 S. 19:18[17]). One textual group includes the expression "the spirit of Yahweh 'attained' [=came upon] a person." The LXX generally uses *hállomai* or its derivatives in these passages, all of which include either an account or a promise ("will attain") in speaking about this particular gift (Jgs. 14:6,19; 15:14: Samson; 1 S. 10:6,10; 11:6; 16:13; in 1 S. 18:10, "an evil spirit from God" rushes upon Saul)." Hausman, "צָלַח *ṣālaḥ*," 383.

[272] According to Mark Smith, "great positive value is placed on various expressions of martial aggression when manifest in combat" throughout heroic poetry and prose, such as the metaphorical language used to describe the burning anger of Samson (Judg 14:19) and Saul (1 Sam 11:6). Furthermore, Smith notes that "this image for the divine warrior may provide conceptual backdrop to the 'force' (*rûaḥ*) that comes upon a warrior from the deity at the outset of conflict (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam. 11:6; 16:13–23; cf. Judg. 13:25; Job 33:4)." Smith, *Poetic Heroes*, 21–22.

[273] For more, see Hayim Tawil, "Hebrew צלח/הצלח , Akkadian *ešēru/šūšuru*: A Lexicographical Note," *JBL* 95 (1976): 405–13.

it is when the spirit of Yhwh rushes upon him after Yhwh directs Samuel to anoint David

as the new king of Israel (1 Sam 16:13). However, unlike Samson and Saul, after the

spirit of Yhwh rushes upon David (1 Sam 16:13), its positive effects remain in place

"from that day onward"—a stark difference with Saul, from whom the spirit of Yhwh

departs in the very next scene (cf. Judg 16:20), only to be replaced by a much more

nefarious one (1 Sam 16:14).[274] The final time צלח is used this way is when an "evil spirit

of God" (רוח אלהים רעה) rushes upon Saul and drives him into madness, initiating Saul's

attempts at killing his young rival for the throne, David (1 Sam 18:10ff).

Baruch Levine argued that this particular and rather powerful endowment of

charismatic leaders with "the spirit of Yhwh," including Samson, Saul, and David, is

unique to the early heroic literature of Israel, which he assigned to the late ninth and early

eighth centuries BCE.[275] Thus, according to Levine:

> It was then that certain biblical authors would have written the heroic
> narratives and the epic poetry celebrating charismatic leaders of the past,
> whom they represented as devoted Yahwists. This interpretation builds on
> the most salient feature of the early material in Judges (and in 1 Samuel),
> its distinctive application of the phrase רוח יהוה ("the spirit of Yahweh").
> Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, this all-important phrase identifies diverse
> gifts, all divinely endowed, including the spirit of prophecy and related
> forms of esoteric enlightenment, skill, and wisdom. Only in the heroic
> literature of the Hebrew Bible, however, does the spirit of Yahweh
> manifest itself as physical prowess in combat.

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[274] As P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. notes, "In ancient tradition a person once touched by divine spirit can never again be free. When Saul loses place to David and Yahweh's spirit falls upon the young Bethlehemite (16:13), an evil spirit arrives in Gibeah as though rushing into the vacuum Saul's loss of favor has created. Another way of saying this is that the infusion of spirit is never neutral. It may endow with special powers, or it may breed misery; and indeed the spirit now torments Saul." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 280.

[275] Levine, "Religion in the Heroic Spirit."

The recognition by Levine of these unique features, what he called the "epic poetry" and "heroic narratives" of the Bible, correspond to what Mark Smith has identified as "heroic poetry" in ancient Israel during the Iron II period, which he argues was "preserved later within larger textual amalgamations, in the prose collections of Genesis through Samuel (Judg 5; 2 Samuel 1, 22, and 23; perhaps Exodus 15), in the poetic collection of the Psalms (see Psalm 68), and occasionally in a later prophetic context (such as Habakkuk 3)."[276] The Samson stories, especially the core texts, should be included as well, since they exhibit the same features of heroic poetry and prose identified by Smith in other early biblical texts, such as the commemoration of warriors' victories (Judg 15:16) or the mourning of their defeats (Judg 14:18), their crossing of routine boundaries (Judg 14:1, 19; 15:1, 8, 14), and the invitation of an audience into their poetic representation (Judg 14:14).[277] Indeed, according to the criteria listed by Smith, the Samson stories should be considered a "textual amalgamation" of heroic poetry and prose *par excellence* with the spirit of Yhwh rushing upon its epic hero—like the famous warrior kings of Israel (Saul and David)—as its defining feature.[278]

The second noticeable difference is the absence of the Nazirite vow as an issue of concern in the core stories (Judg 14–15), despite it being central to Samson's birth narrative (Judg 13) and making a brief appearance in the Samson and Delilah stories

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[276] Mark S. Smith, "The Passing of Warrior Poetry in the Era of Prosaic Heroes," in *Worship, Women and War – Essays in Honor of Susan Niditch*, ed. John J. Collins, T. M. Lemos, and Saul M. Olyan, BJS 357 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 3.

[277] Smith, *Poetic Heroes*, 1–3.

[278] Smith makes mention of the Samson stories multiple times in his work (Smith, *Poetic Heroes*, 22, 224, 318, 353, 359, 361, 431, 432, 508, 529, 547, 549, 570), but it is not clear whether he considers them on the same level of ancient heroic poetry and prose as the other biblical texts he examines.

(Judg 16:17). Nevertheless, some argue that the Nazirite vow is key to understanding the entire Samson story, especially in its final forms (Judg 13–16).[279] However, the Nazirite vow receives no attention whatsoever in these central texts as Samson repeatedly breaks the stipulations outlined to his parents by the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:4–5, 13–14), as well as those detailed to Moses by Yhwh in the book of Numbers (Num 6:1–21), although the latter is considered by many to be a late Priestly text and therefore a different Nazirite vow than the one in the Samson stories.[280]

In the birth narrative, the messenger of Yhwh instructs Samson's mother to not consume wine (יין) or strong drink (שכר) or eat anything unclean (טמא) and for Samson to not shave his hair (Judg 13:4–5).[281] These divine instructions, apart from not shaving his hair, are retold to Samson's father, Manoah, first by Samson's mother (Judg 13:7), then by the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:13–14). When the messenger of Yhwh repeats these instructions to Manoah he adds the following detail: "anything that comes from the vine she may not eat" (Judg 13:14). This additional feature brings Samson's Nazirite vow into closer alignment with the one found in the book of Numbers (Num 6:3–4). Intriguingly, it is only during the first encounter between Samson's mother and the messenger of Yhwh that the prohibition against shaving Samson's hair is explicitly given (Judg 13:5). In

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[279] For the centrality of the Nazirite vow to the Samson stories, see Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Style"; and Christophe Lemardelé, "Samson le *nazir*: un mythe du jeune Guerrier," *RHR* 222 (2005): 259–86.

[280] See Hermann-Josef Stipp, "Simson, der Nasiräer," *VT* 45 (1995): 337–69; and Christophe Lemardelé, "Être nazir: du guerrier yahwiste au voeu cultuel du judaïsme ancien Origine et transformation d'un rite de cheveu," *RHR* 3 (2007): 275–88.

[281] In Judg 13:5, it literally reads: "and no razor shall go up upon his head" (ומורה לא־יעלה על־ראשו).

addition to these prohibitions in the birth narrative, the legislation given to Moses by

Yhwh also states that a Nazirite is not to encounter the dead (Num 6:6–12).[282]

Therefore, according to these texts, a Nazirite is not to drink alcohol, eat anything

unclean, shave their hair, or encounter the dead. Nevertheless, in the core Samson stories,

Samson encounters the corpse (מפלת) of the lion he tears apart (Judg 14:6) on his way to

see his Philistine bride (Judg 14:8–9) and the corpses of the Philistines he slays in

Ashkelon (Judg 14:19), Timnah (Judg 15:6–8), and Lehi (Judg 15:14–15). Samson also

participates in drinking feasts (משתה) with the Philistine companions (מרעים) at his

wedding (Judg 14:10), which comparative texts and material culture have shown included

copious amounts of alcohol.[283] The only other time the Nazirite vow is mentioned in the

Samson stories aside from the birth narrative (Judg 13) is toward the end of the episodes

with Delilah (Judg 16:4–21) when Samson reveals that the secret to his great strength is

because he is a Nazirite whose hair has never been shaved (Judg 16:17), which is what

proceeds to happen (Judg 16:19). Yet even there, the mention of the Nazirite vow is seen

by some scholars as a scribal interpolation by the author of the birth narrative to shift the

source of Samson's strength from his magical locks to the spirit of Yhwh working

through the vow (Judg 16:17, 20).[284] Hermann-Josef Stipp, for example, concludes:

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[282] For more, see Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4A (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 215–26, 229–35.

[283] See Yasur-Landau, "Old Wine in New Vessels"; Maeir, "Aegean Feasting"; Peter Altmann and Janling Fu, eds., *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014); and Janling Fu, Cynthia Shafer-Elliot, and Carol Myers, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Food in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

[284] Judges 16:17 in the MT reads as follows: "And he told her all his heart, and he said to her, 'A razor has not come upon my head, because a Nazir of God I have been from the womb of my mother. If I am shaven, then my strength will turn away from me, and I will become weak, and I will be like every man.'" Many scholars suspect that כִּי־נְזִיר אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי ("because a Nazir of God I have been from the

Simson wurde im Ri. xiii aus Gründen des literarischen Rahmens als Retter sowie wegen der Rolle seines Haares in der Delila-episode als Nasiräer gezeichnet. Durch die Erhebung zum Nasiräer hat man seine übermenschliche Kraft von ihrer vormals magischen Ursache gelöst und in einen jahwistischen Deuterahmen eingebunden. Nun war es in einer nicht näher spezifizierten Weise YHWH selbst, der sich in Simsons Krafttaten manifestierte. Da mit einem Scherverbot gekoppelt, war das Nasiräertum eine naheliegende Wahl bei der Suche nach einem geeigneten theologischen Interpretament. Dieser religiöse Sonderstatus sollte ihn ebenso wie seine Berufung zum Retter auf- und nicht abwerten. Dazu waren allerdings nicht unerhebliche Modifikationen seiner Obliegenheiten als Retter und Nasiräer erforderlich. Mit Rücksicht auf die vorliegenden Erzählstoffe hat man seine Retteraufgabe auf den Beginn der Befreiung von den Philistern reduziert, wobei zustatten kam, daß es laut 1 Sam. vii 2-14 Samuel gelang, die Vorherrschaft der Philister zu brechen. Die Nasiräatsverpflichtungen hat man für Simson in einem souveränen Akt auf das Scherverbot und das Verbot der Leichenberührung (unter normalen Umständen) reduziert. Das Nasiräat à la Simson veranschaulicht die Großzügigkeit, die die alttestamentlichen Tradenten dem danitischen Draufgänger entgegenbrachten. Auch moderne Leser sollten sie ihm nicht verweigern.[285]

As mentioned above, the prohibitions against consuming strong drink or wine or eating anything unclean is only applied to Samson's mother by the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:4, 7, 14), whereas Samson is merely prohibited from having his hair shaved (Judg 13:5). However, in the LXX[A] and the LXX[B], the prohibitions against consuming strong drink or wine or eating anything unclean apply both to Samson (LXX Judg 13:14) and Samon's mother (LXX Judg 13:4, 7), possibly indicating a different *Vorlage* than the one underlying the MT, or a common type of revision by the Greek translators.[286] The

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womb of my mother") is an interpolation. See, for example, Kratz, *Composition*, 208; Jonker, *Exclusivity and Variety*, 127–33, 166; and Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 102–04.

[285] Stipp, "Simson," 369.

[286] For more, see Natalio Fernández Marcos, "The Septuagint Reading of the Samson Cycle," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 87–99; Natalio Fernández Marcos, "The B-Text of Judges: *Kaige*-Revision and Beyond," in *After Qumran: Old and Modern Editions of the Biblical Texts—The Historical Books*, ed. Hans Ausloos, Bénédicte Lemmelijn, and Julio C. Trebolle Barrera (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 161–69; and Natalio

latter is often associated with what scholars call the *kaige* revision—a reference to the biblical translators frequent use of the Greek phrase και γε ("and indeed") to translate the Hebrew phrase וְגַם ("and also")—which likely reflects scribal activity by Hellenistic Jews who tried to align its wording in Greek as literally as possible to that of the Hebrew.[287]

According to Natalio Fernández Marcos, "there is a scholarly consensus that the group of manuscripts that includes the *codex Vaticanus* transmits the καιγε revision in the book of Judges, and the group of manuscripts including *codex Alexandrinus*, the Hexaplaric recension. The Old Greek [OG] has been best preserved in the Lucianic or Antiochene recension."[288] Furthermore, Fernández Marcos argues that the translators of the OG, such as those who produced the *kaige* revision, used clarifying insertions "to make the narrative fluent and understandable, making the obscure points of the original Hebrew more comprehensible to the reader."[289] This was likely done by scribes who added words, adjusted pronouns, and made explicit the implicit subject of a text, the very types of revisions seen throughout the Samson stories (Judg 13:11; 14:2, 7, 14, 17; 15:1, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 18, 20; 16:1, 3, 4, 11, 15, 20).[290] The adjustment of pronouns, for example, is present in both the LXX[A] and LXX[B] when the messenger of Yhwh is reiterating the nature of the Nazirite vow to Manoah:

Fernández Marcos, "Joshua and Judges," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Septuagint*, ed. Alison G. Salvesen and Timothy Michael Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 201–15.

[287] For more, see Anneli Aejmelaeus, "The Origins of the Kaige Revision," *Scriptures in the Making: Texts and Their Transmission in Late Second Temple Judaism*, CBET, eds. Raimo Hakola, Paavo Huotari, Jessi Orpana (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 285–311.

[288] Fernández Marcos, "Septuagint Reading," 88.

[289] Fernández Marcos, "Septuagint Reading," 90.

[290] Fernández Marcos, "Septuagint Reading," 89–92.

מִכֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא מִגֶּפֶן הַיַּיִן לֹא תֹאכַל וְיַיִן וְשֵׁכָר אַל־תֵּשְׁתְּ וְכָל־טֻמְאָה אַל־תֹּאכַל כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־צִוִּיתִיהָ תִּשְׁמֹר	ἀπὸ πάντων, ὅσα ἐκπορεύεται ἐξ ἀμπέλου, οὐ φάγεται καὶ οἶνον καὶ σικερα μὴ πιέτω καὶ πᾶν ἀκάθαρτον μὴ φαγέτω· πάντα, ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην αὐτῇ, φυλαξάσθω.
"She 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." (Judges 13:14 MT)	"He shall not eat of anything that comes from the vine. And he is not to drink wine and *sikera* and he is not to eat any unclean thing. He is to observe everything that I commanded her." (Judges 13:14 LXX)

Thus, in the Greek manuscripts of the LXX, Samson and his mother are not to consume strong drink or wine or eat anything unclean (Judg 13:14), whereas in the Hebrew of the MT, those prohibitions of the Nazirite vow only apply to Samson's mother (Judg 13:4, 7, 14). As noted above, the OG translators of Judges makes these types of revisions "to clarify the sense of obscure or ambiguous passages" like those found in Judg 13.[291] Nevertheless, the Nazirite vow, which is central to the birth narrative in the opening chapter (Judg 13), has no place among the central parts of the Samson stories (Judg 14–15). The possible reasons for these unique features of the Nazirite vow in Samson's birth narrative compared to the book of Numbers (Num 6:1–21) and other biblical texts (Gen 49:26; Deut 33:16; 1 Sam 1:11; Amos 2:11–12) will be explored further below.[292]

The third significant difference in Judg 14–15 is that Samson is not situated by the authors "between Zorah and Eshtaol" (Judg 13:25; 16:31) or identified with his father as

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[291] Fernández Marcos, "Septuagint Reading," 92.

[292] For the significant differences between the Nazirite vow described in Numbers 6 and portrayed in Judges 13, see Niditch, *'My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man,'* 81–94; and Lemardelé, "Samson le *nazir*," 277–78.

an Israelite from the clan (משפחה) of Dan (Judg 13:2) as in Judg 13 and 16. Furthermore,

Samson's father "Manoah" (מנוח) is called by name seventeen times in the birth narrative

(Judg 13:2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22) and once at Samson's burial (Judg

16:31) but never in Judg 14–15, even though he is active throughout the marriage story

(Judg 14:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 16, 19). Unfortunately, Samson's mother, who is central in

the birth narrative, and is present in the marriage story as well, remains unnamed in all

the Samson stories. Samson is therefore not explicitly identified as an Israelite in Judg

14–15. Moreover, the Israelites are almost completely absent in these chapters. In fact, it

is only the "the men of Judah" (איש יהודה) who are present in the story when they bargain

with Samson and the Philistines to turn over their divinely chosen deliverer to their

foreign rulers (Judg 15:9–11). Meanwhile, "Israel" is only mentioned twice, not as part of

the story, but as an aside from the narrator (Judg 14:4; 15:20). The first time is considered

by some a narrative obtrusion of the text (Judg 14:4), that is, an editorial addition, since it

likely includes an unnecessary comment about the status of the Philistines over Israel in

the story.[293] The second time is part of the Deuteronomistic framework that was very

likely the original ending of the stories summarizing Samson's reign (Judg 15:20).[294] To

whom, then, does Samson belong?

In the previous chapter, it was noted how the Samson stories take place in a

variety of ancient Israelite, Judahite, and Philistine cities and towns. In Judg 14–15, the

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[293] For more, see Christopher T. Paris, "The Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4," in *Narrative Obtrusions in the Hebrew Bible*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2014), 69–99. This comment, however, only appears to be an obtrusion into the narrative if Philistine rule is clearly not part of the story or if it originally preceded the core Samson stories in the book of Judges (e.g., Judg 3:31; 10:6, 7, 11; 13:1), which is unlikely, since each of these notices appears to be Deuteronomistic and therefore written later than the earliest core stories.

[294] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42; and Müller, "Redactional Framework."

sites include Timnah (14:1, 2, 5), Ashkelon (14:19), Etam (15:8, 11), Judah (15:9), Lehi

(15:9, 14, 19), Ramat-lehi (15:17), and En-hakkore (15:19). Six of these seven sites are in

Judah, even though the exact location of several of them is unknown, that is, Etam, Lehi,

Ramath-Lehi, and En-Hakkore. However, according to the book of Chronicles, Etam is a

descendent of Judah (1 Chr 4:3), a village listed in the genealogical record of Simeon (1

Chr 4:32) and one of the many Judean cities fortified during the reign of King Rehoboam

(2 Chr 11:5–12).[295] Two other cities in that list from the book of Chronicles overlap with

locations in the Samson stories: Zorah (Judg 13:25, 16:31; 2 Chr 11:10) and Hebron

(Judg 16:3; 2 Chr 11:10). Three of the cities in the list are in Philistine territories across

the Shephelah: Gath, Lachish, and Azekah (2 Chr 11:8–9). The significance of these

fortified cities and towns for the Chroniclers is noted by Sara Japhet:

> Lachish and Azekah (also mentioned together in Jer. 34.7 and Neh. 11.30)
> were probably the most important strongholds on the western side in the
> Shephelah. In this list, Lachish is joined to the southern line of
> fortifications on its western edge, while Azekah is connected with the
> north-western cities of Zorah and Aijalon, situated on the routes leading to
> the northern parts of the Judaean hills from the west. The importance of
> Aijalon on the border between Judah and the Philistines may be
> illuminated by additional references to its history. It is included in the
> territory of Dan (Josh. 19.42), conquered by the Amorites (Judg. 1.35); it
> is a point of controversy between its Benjaminite residents and the people
> of Gath (I Chron. 8.13); and it is in fact a border point with the Philistines
> (I Sam. 14.31).[296]

Etam is also among the Judean towns surrounding Bethlehem in the additional

district listed in the Greek version of the book of Joshua (LXX Josh 15:59α).[297] Some

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[295] See Gary Knoppers, *I Chronicles 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 12 (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 344.

[296] Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 667.

[297] Hartmut N. Rösel, *Joshua*, HCOT (Leuven: University of Leuven Press, 2011), 232–64 [262].

scholars identify Etam with the site of *'Ain 'Aṭān*, but most situate it in the vicinity of

Khirbet el-Ḥōḥ, which is several kilometers southwest of Bethlehem.[298] Regardless of its

exact location, Etam can be confidently located in Judah. Moreover, whichever textual

traditions these cities are derived from or included among, their geographical orientation

fulfill both historical and theological functions for Judah.[299] All the other sites whose

precise locations are unknown—Lehi (Judg 15:9, 14, 19), Ramath-Lehi (Judg 15:17), and

En-Hakkore (Judg 15:19)—are situated in the same area in the Samson stories and

feature two *hapax legomena*, Ramath-Lehi (רמת לחי) and En-Hakkore (עין הקורא),

signifying clever forms of paronomasia and polysemy that is explored in greater depth

below.[300] The only site that is clearly not in Judah is one of the few that can be located

definitively by archaeologists, the Philistine city of Ashkelon, where Samson travels to in

a spirit-induced rage to kill thirty men and collect their "armor" (חליצותם)—another clever

use of wordplay in the story—to pay off his debt to the thirty wedding companions who

solved his riddle, albeit in a duplicitous way (Judg 14:19).[301]

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[298] Gass, "Simson und die Philister," 377–78; Knoppers, *I Chronicles*, 344; and Rösel, *Joshua*, 262.

[299] Adrian H. W. Curtis, "Joshua: Historical Mapping," in *Ancient and Modern Scriptural Historiography/L'Historiographie Biblique, Ancienne et Moderne*, ed. George J. Brooke and Thomas Römer, BETL 207 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 99–108.

[300] For more on paronomasia, polysemy, and other forms of wordplay in the Bible, see Scott B. Noegel, "Paronomasia," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3:24–29; idem, "Polysemy," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3:178–86; and idem, *"Wordplay" in Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ANEM 26 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021).

[301] The term חֲלִיצָה is only used twice in the Bible (Judg 14:19; 2 Sam 2:21) and is translated variously as "clothes" (Butler; Frolov; Groß ["Kleidung"]; Knauf ["Kleidern"]; Matthews; Spronk), "garments" (Soggin), "gear" (Boling; Niditch), "plunder" (Schneider), "sashes" (Fox), and "spoils" (Auld; LaGrange ["dépouilles"]; Nelson; Webb). Alter's translation of "armor" seems most fitting since its only other use is in a military context in which Abner pleads with Asahel to take the חֲלִיצָה from one of the fallen warriors after the battle at Gibeon between the servants of Saul and those of David (2 Sam 2:12–32). Alter infers a clever use of wordplay by the biblical author who demonstrates how Samson upholds his end of the

Thus, if Judg 13 and 16 are additions to the Samson stories, and there is no affiliation of Samson with Dan or Israel in Judg 14–15 other than Deuteronomistic additions (Judg 14:4; 15:20), but only with Judah and territories on its borders, then it stands to reason that Samson was more likely a Judahite character before he was a שפט over all Israel (Judg 15:20; 16:31) and from the clan of Dan (Judg 13:2; 16:31). The motivation to transform Samson from a Judahite to an Israelite (Judg 15:20; 16:31) and then to a Danite character (Judg 13:2) makes sense given earlier biblical traditions in the book of Joshua that locate Dan in the south, on the border of Judah, and associate it with Judahite towns, such as Zorah and Eshtaol (Josh 15:13; 21:16; cf. Josh 19:40–48), which became the hometowns of Samson and his family (Judg 13:25; 16:31).[302]

The reason for this transformation also makes sense within the initial framework of the DH, which most likely took shape in the seventh century BCE following the destruction of Israel and survival of Judah from the Neo-Assyrian onslaughts at the end of the eighth century BCE.[303] It is within those contexts that Deuteronomistic scribes likely portrayed the leaders of Israel and Judah reflecting the complicated salvation history of their people, with the judges anticipating, endorsing, and critiquing later

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bargain (Judg 14:12–13) while also giving the Philistines their comeuppance for cheating him (Judg 14:15, 18). Thus, he writes: "From the one other biblical occurrence of this term *ḥalitsah* in 2 Samuel 2:21, it is clear that it refers to armor, not clothing in general. Samson, then, chooses to confront and kill armed warriors. It is probably the armor that he sends as 'changes of garment' [החליפות] to the thirty men who were at his wedding: this would be an act of defiance, demonstrating to them the bold and deadly thing he has done. No mention is made of the fine cloths, perhaps because the armor is far more than the equivalent in value of fine cloth and garment." Alter, *The Former Prophets*, 183.

[302] For more on Dan in the book of Joshua, see Bartusch, *Understanding Dan*, 80–108.

[303] Campbell and O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History*; Nelson, "Double Redaction"; Römer, *So-Called*; and Knoppers, "History as Confession?"; idem, "History and Historiography"; and idem, "From Israel to Judah." Although he argues that the "overall framework" of the Deuteronom(ist)ic History took shape in the exilic period, Raymond Person acknowledges that its roots and sources were preexilic (Person, Jr., *Deuteronomic School*, 25–29).

monarchic rulers, especially the northern kings of Israel, with whom they shared many of

the same responsibilities.[304] With the downfall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem

by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, what Noth called Israel's "historical catastrophes," the

form and function of the DH evolved from a salvation history to a tragic history.[305] This

evolution of the DH is reflected in the Samson stories when the victorious warrior in

conflict with Israel's enemies (Judg 14–15) transforms into a tragic figure foreshadowing

the downfall of Judah and her leaders (Judg 16), which is explored in depth below.[306]

What, then, was the socio-political situation in Judah leading up to the seventh century

BCE that would have made the Samson stories in Judg 14–15 particularly amenable to

the grand historical and theological project underway by the Deuteronomists?

3.3. Historical Criticism of Judges 14–15

The eighth century BCE was a pivotal period for the kingdoms of Israel and

Judah. Not only was the encroaching juggernaut of the Neo-Assyrian army continuing its

westward march through the Levant, reaching as far as the sand-swept gates of Egypt, but

local polities were in constant flux, as the Israelites, Judahites, and Philistines, as well as

their neighbors in the Transjordan, that is, the Ammonites, Edomites, and Moabites, vied

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[304] Brettler, "Book of Judges," 416–18; Uwe Becker, "The Place of the Book of Judges in the So-Called Deuteronomistic History," in *Book-Seams in the Hexateuch I*, ed. Christoph Berner and Harald Samuel, FAT 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 339–51 [esp. 349–51]; Römer, *So-Called*, 137–38; Focken, "Structure of Offices"; and Müller, "Redactional Framework," 129–30, 34.

[305] This evolution of perspectives in the DH was most famously argued in North America by Frank Moore Cross, who suggested an original preexilic edition of the DH centered around the successful reign of King Josiah in Judah during the seventh century BCE ("The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History," in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press], 274–89). For more on this and competing theories, see Römer, "So-Called Deuteronomistic History."

[306] Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists."

for control of the territories "from Dan to Beersheba."[307] Indeed, the military campaigns

of the Assyrians during this period caused major upheavals for the kingdoms of Israel and

Judah, ultimately resulting in the capture of Samaria by Shalmaneser V in 722 BCE, the

destruction and deportation of most of the land of Israel by Sargon II in 720 BCE, and the

decimation of the land of Judah by Sennacherib in 701 BCE.[308] While these and other

campaigns by the Neo-Assyrian kings were intended to establish *ṭūbu* ("good relations")

and *sulummû* ("peacemaking") among their vassals across the empire, maintaining *pax

Assyrica* exacted a heavy price.[309] Rebellions and/or failures to pay tribute were not

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[307] For more, see Gilad Itach, "The Kingdom of Israel in the Eighth Century: From a Regional Power to Assyrian Provinces," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 57–77; Avraham Faust, "Society and Culture in the Kingdom of Judah during the Eighth Century," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 179–203; Hermann Michael Niemann, "Neighbors and Foes, Rivals and Kin: Philistines, Shepheleans, Judeans between Geography and Economy, History and Theology," in *The Philistines and Other "Sea Peoples" in Text and Archeology*, ed. Ann E. Killebrew and Gunnar Lehmann, ABS 15 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 243–64; and Bruce Routledge, "Transjordan in the Eighth Century BCE," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 139–59.

[308] For an overview of these Assyrian campaigns, see William R. Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies*, SHCANE 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1999); K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "Recent Study on Sargon II, King of Assyria: Implications for Biblical Studies," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible – Comparative Explorations*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr, JSOTSup 341 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 288–329; idem, "Assyrian Involvement in the Southern Levant at the End of the Eighth Century BCE," in *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period*, ed. Andrew G. Vaughan and Ann E. Killebrew, SBLSymS 18 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2003), 235–63; and idem, "Assyria's Expansion West of the Euphrates," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 17–33.

[309] F. M. Fales defines *Pax Assyriaca* in the following way: "From the Assyrians' own point of view, *Pax Assyriaca* represented the desired state of law and order—or 'security' in present-day terminology—in territories subject to direct (but also indirect) Assyrian hegemony, such as to allow the imperial civilian and military occupants (or, respectively, the 'agents' of the Assyrian king) and their local clients to pursue their day-to-day activities with no outside interference or danger. The Assyrian terms that define and circumscribe *Pax Assyriaca* pertain to two different levels. On the one hand, we find *ṭūbu* and *sulummû*, meaning 'good relations' and 'peacemaking,' respectively, which are used when describing the diplomatic dealings of the Assyrian state with a foreign entity, with the relevant verb *salāmu*, 'to be in peace'…On the other hand, *šulmu*, 'state of well-being, intact state,' was the technical term that described the optimal situation of security obtaining in inner territories of the empire." Frederick M. Fales, "On Pax Assyriaca in the Eighth–Seventh Centuries BCE and Its Implications," in *Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical and Modern International Relations: Swords into Plowshares*, ed. Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 18.

tolerated—a costly lesson learned by Hoshea in Israel (722 BCE) and Hezekiah in Judah (701 BCE). These conflicts with the Neo-Assyrian empire left the kingdom of Judah in disarray, despite its capital city having survived Sennacherib's siege.[310]

Therefore, following the devastation of the Judean countryside by the Assyrians, the kingdom of Judah was largely reduced to a city-state confined to Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings.[311] Within this new environment, the population of Jerusalem swelled, as more residents of the recently ravaged areas in the southern Levant poured into the city and its surrounding hinterland.[312] This urban migration included exiled Israelites, whose kingdom had been destroyed twenty years earlier, and displaced Philistines, whose border towns with Judah, such as Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath, had also suffered at the hands of the Assyrian army. As a result, a variety of cultural, religious, and social issues came to the fore, some of which are possibly reflected in the biblical writings that began to emerge during the late eighth and early seventh centuries

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[310] For the biblical accounts, see 2 Kgs 18–19; Isa 36–37; 2 Chr 32. For more on Sennacherib's accounts, see John M. Russell, *The Writing on the Wall – Studies in the Architectural Context of Late3 Assyrian Palace Inscriptions*, MC 9 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 124–43; Albert K. Grayson and Jamie R. Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC), Part 1*, RINAP 3/1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 55–69; Isaac Kalimi and Seth Richardson, eds., *Sennacherib at the Gates of Jerusalem – Story, History and Historiography* (Ledien: Brill, 2014); and Nazek Khalid Matty, *Sennacherib's Campaign Against Judah and Jerusalem in 701 B.C.: A Historical Reconstruction*, BZAW 487 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).

[311] According to the Rasam Cylinder, Sennacherib's army "surrounded and conquered forty-six of his [Hezekiah's] fortified walled cities and small(er) settlements in their environs, which were without number" (URU.MEŠ-*šu* É BÀD.MEŠ *dan-nu-ti ù* URU.MEŠ TUR.MEŠ *ša li-me-ti-šu-nu ša ni-ba la i-šu-ú*). Translation adapted from Grayson and Novotny, *Royal Inscriptions*, 65.

[312] For more, see Avraham Faust, "On Jerusalem's Expansion During the Iron Age II," in *Exploring the Narrative: Jerusalem and Jordan in the Bronze and Iron Ages*, ed. Eveline van der Steen, Jeannette Boertien, and Noor Mulder-Hymans (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 256–85. For a detailed analysis of the surrounding settlements around Jerusalem, see Yigal Moyal and Avraham Faust, "Jerusalem's Hinterland in the Eighth-Seventh Centuries BCE: Towns, Villages, Farmsteads, and Royal Estates," *PEQ* 147 (2015): 283–98.

BCE.[313] The emergence of this biblical material was mirrored by a prolific period of text production in general, which is reflected in the significant increase of written objects discovered in Judah during this time, including bullae, ostraca, inscribed weights, and the *lmlk* ("[belonging] to the king") seals.[314]

It was these expansionist policies into the Levant by the Neo-Assyrian empire during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE that likely affected major changes in the political and religious ideologies of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, which are seen in the biblical texts from that period. Accordingly, the land of Assyria is mentioned more than 150 times throughout the Bible, especially in the historical books of Kings and Chronicles, and the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, and Nahum. Assyrian leaders also feature indirectly, often as ciphers for arrogant and sinful agents under the control of Yhwh. Thus, according to Eckart Frahm:

> One might be inclined to argue that the Biblical authors' fascination with Assyria is of no more than "historicist" interest. But such a view would overlook something rather crucial: the fact that Assyria's penetration into the Levant helped initiate and catalyze the 'axial' revolution of religious and political thought that is codified in the Bible. To phrase it differently: the emergence of a new religious and "national" identity in Israel and Judah in the wake of Tiglath-pileser's campaigns to the West can be seen as a direct response to the political and intellectual challenges posed by Assyrian imperialism.[315]

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[313] Schniedewind, *How the Bible*, 64–90; Konrad Schmid, "The Biblical Writings in the Late Eighth Century BCE," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 489–501; and Israel Finkelstein, "Part VII: Judahite Historiography," in *Essays on Biblical Historiography: From Jeroboam II to John Hyrcanus*, FAT I 148 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 413–518.

[314] Ephraim Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, II, The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods (732–332 B.C.E.)*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 169–200; Christopher Rollston, "Scripture and Inscriptions: Eighth-Century Israel and Judah in Writing," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 463–73; and Oded Lipschits, "Judah under Assyrian Rule and the Early Phase of Stamping Jar Handles," in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright, ANEM 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 337–55.

It is within this sociopolitical background that Judg 14–15 takes on several,

distinct levels of meaning, prompting a series of questions. First, how would Neo-

Assyrian culture and dominance have affected the composition and reception of the

earliest Samson stories during this period, particularly the extensive use of wordplay by

the biblical authors? Second, what is significant about the mighty Samson being

portrayed as a solitary warrior fighting on behalf of Israel (Judg 15:9–20) against a much

more powerful overlord (Judg 14:4; 15:11) while exhibiting characteristics similar to

those on display in Neo-Assyrian rhetoric and fame? Third, how might the collapse of the

kingdom of Israel, the weakened borders with Philistia, and the subsequent influx of

Israelites and others into Judah have informed the authors' concern with intermarriage

(Judg 14:1–15:8) between those from Israel and "the uncircumcised" Philistines (Judg

14:3; 15:8)?[316] These issues of cultural, political, and religious identity codified in the

language of the biblical authors are crucial for understanding the *Sitz im Leben* behind the

Samson stories. But how can such issues be deciphered in the text and what signifies the

types of "Assyrian imperialism" identified by Frahm above?

One area that scholars have long noted is the sophisticated use of wordplay

throughout the book of Judges, with the Samson stories being particularly fruitful.[317] The

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[315] Eckart Frahm, "Assyria in the Hebrew Bible," in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 556.

[316] The use of "the uncircumcised" (הערלים) as a designation for the Philistines is only found in Deuteronomistic texts (1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20) with the sole exception of Saul's death in the book of Chronicles (1 Chr 10:4), which is likely a repeat by the Chronicler of the same Deuteronomistic account in the book of Samuel (1 Sam 31:4). For more on the practice of circumcision and its use as an identity marker between the Israelites and Philistines, see Bloch-Smith, "Israelite Ethnicity"; and Faust, "Bible, Archaeology."

[317] Alter, "Samson without Folklore"; Amit, *Book of Judges*; Baker, *Hollow Men*; Marian Broida, "Closure in Samson," *JHebS* 10 (2010):1–34; Crenshaw, *Samson*; Exum, *Samson and Delilah*; Greenstein,

biblical authors employed a wide range of literary and rhetorical devices in the Samson stories, including assonance, irony, puns, repetition, riddles, and rhyme. It is perhaps for these reasons James Crenshaw confidently claims that the "Samson saga demonstrates Israelite narrative art at its zenith" and J. Cheryl Exum describes it as "a superb specimen of Hebrew literary artistry."[318] Recently, scholars have looked to the broader cultural contexts and textual traditions of the ancient Near East to find parallel practices in the scribal milieu of Mesopotamia and Egypt to better understand the form and function of wordplay in the Bible and how it was understood to exert cosmic and divine power over its audiences.[319] Accordingly, Scott B. Noegel notes the following when describing some of these broader contexts:

> In Mesopotamia, we know that scribal masters in the Neo-Assyrian period viewed themselves as integral links in a chain of transmission going back to the gods, and in some circles, traced their genealogy back to Enmeduranki, the antediluvian king of Sippar. Elsewhere, we are told that they transmitted knowledge from the mouth of Ea, the patron god of scribes, whose recorded speeches abound in "wordplay." Master scribes were an interdisciplinary lot in Mesopotamia who wielded enormous social and cosmological power, especially if they excelled in the divinatory arts. While recitation and oral tradition played important roles for Mesopotamian literate elites, it was the act of writing that was central to their identity.[320]

"Riddle of Samson"; Charles Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh: The *Ś/ŠḪQ* Pun in Judges 16:25-27," *JBL* 128 (2009), 61–64; Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, JSOT 68 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988); Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Stanislav Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII–XVI," *VT* 34 (1984), 454–61; Wong, *Compositional Strategy*; and Zakovitch, *The Life of Samson*.

[318] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 149; and Exum, "Symmetry and Balance," 1.

[319] See the essays in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, ed. Scott B. Noegel (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2000).

[320] Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient*, 30.

To be a part of the Mesopotamian scribal elite, one of the masters of their craft, scribes had to be thoroughly educated about vast textual traditions, especially knowing lexical lists that contained thorough understanding and wisdom that was believed to ultimately derive from a primordial past with the gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon whose divine characteristics and roles fluctuated across a wide variety of esoteric texts.[321] Still, master scribes were not commenting upon and preserving this divine wisdom for themselves; rather, these experts were in service to the king and his royal court, who assigned textual scholars different responsibilities, depending on their lineage, specialty, and training.[322] These scribal masters were convinced they were preserving the very essence of Mesopotamian culture and wisdom in their minds and in their writings because they believed the world was ordered out of chaos and that order was grasped through the written form, something Marc Van de Mieroop describes as "Babylonian epistemology."[323] In other words, the scribal elite were believed to encounter a power that transcended this world through their mastery of language, what Thorkild Jacobsen described elsewhere as the "numinous" in Mesopotamian religion.[324] Perhaps the most

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[321] Eckart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 5 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag 2011); Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology in Assyria*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 6 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015); Francesca Rochberg, *Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 61–102; and Marc Van de Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks – The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[322] Eckart Frahm, "Keeping Company with Men of Learning," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 508–32; Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology*, 30–38; Rochberg, *Before Nature*, 64; and Van de Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, 22.

[323] Van de Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*.

[324] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness – A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). See, also, Andrew George, "Access to Religious Knowledge in Ancient Babylonia," in *The Use and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Antiquity*, ed. Catherine Hezser and Diana Edelman (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021), 20–35.

fitting albeit contested description of these roles and responsibilities by Mesopotamian

scholars was what A. Leo Oppenheim famously described as "the stream of the

tradition—that is, what can loosely be termed the corpus of literary texts maintained,

controlled, and carefully kept alive by a tradition served by successive generations of

learned and well-trained scribes."[325] Oppenheim contrasted these master scribes and their

vital "stream of tradition" with the mass of texts produced daily by lower-level scribes

who recorded the regular activities, documents, and minutiae of ancient Mesopotamia.[326]

Oppenheim's famous phrase, however, should not mislead one into thinking that these

higher level textual traditions were incapable of change, creativity, and innovation by the

master scribes who composed and preserved them, since they were, like all texts, subject

to the historical contingencies and particularities of their authors and audiences, despite

being "maintained, controlled, and carefully kept alive" over long periods of time.[327]

Being allies, enemies, and/or vassals of these great empires to the north (Assyria,

Babylon, Persia) and south (Egypt) of Israel and Judah, it is the activity of these master

scribes that is important for understanding the ways in which biblical scribes were also

preserving their own textual traditions, displaying mastery of their own native tongue,

and exhibiting religious and social power through sophisticated wordplay in imperial

contexts.[328] This type of cultural resistance may represent a form of linguistic contact

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[325] A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia – Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 13.

[326] ibid.

[327] Eleanor Robson, "The Production and Dissemination of Scholarly Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 557–76.

[328] Van der Toorn, *Scribal* Culture, 205–32; and Scott B. Noegel, "'Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign': Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East," in *Science and Superstition:*

between Akkadian, Aramaic, and Hebrew authors, whose compositions reflected the

dynamic cultural, religious, and social realities forming in ancient Israel and Judah in

opposition to their larger, richer, and stronger overlords.[329] To better understand these

biblical scribes, scholars have identified two primary categories of wordplay, each of

which is derived from classical Greek rhetoric: paronomasia and polysemy.[330]

Paronomasia combines a similarity of sound with a dissimilarity of meaning, such

as when the Philistines laugh (שָׂחַק) at Samson while he entertains (צָחַק) them before they

are crushed (שָׂחַק) in the temple of Dagon at Gaza (Judg 16:25–30).[331] Polysemy, on the

other hand, is the capacity for a sign, word, phrase, or sentence to bear multiple meanings

in a single context, such as the root word פעם that both describes how the spirit of Yhwh

impelled (פַּעַם) Samson into action (Judg 13:25) and functions as a simple marker of time

(פַּעַם) in the Samson stories (Judg 15:3; 16:15, 20, 28).[332] Within these broad categories

are multiple types and subtypes of paronomasia and polysemy, which are distinguished

by their form and function, their explicit versus implicit usage, and their aural versus

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Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 143–62.

[329] Samuel L. Boyd, *Language Contact, Colonial Administration, and the Construction of Identity in Ancient Israel - Constructing the Context for Contact*, HSM 66 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021); and Marc van de Mieroop, *Before and After Babel: Writing as Resistance in Ancient Near Eastern Empires - Writing as Resistance in ancient near Eastern Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2023).

[330] Scott B. Noegel, "Paronomasia," in vol. 3 of *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 24–29; idem, "Polysemy," in vol. 3 of *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 178–86; and idem, *"Wordplay" in Ancient*, 155–296.

[331] As Charles Halton notes, "The author of the pericope in Judges forms a pun by providing an ironic situation in which both of the meanings of *šḥq* and *śḥq* perfectly fit the context of 16:25–27. There is no orthographic difference between these two roots in an unvocalized text, and this leads to graphical ambiguity, which facilitates this pun." Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh," 63.

[332] Alter, "Samson without Folklore," 49–51.

visual registers.[333] Noegel's taxonomy, for example, includes as many as fourteen types of polysemy and twelve types of paronomasia.[334] The core texts from the Samson stories (Judg 14–15) examined below include primary examples of both types of wordplay in ancient near Eastern texts, such as the polysemy in Samson's חידה to the Philistine companions at his wedding (Judg 14) and the paronomasia used to describe his massacre of Philistines with a jawbone at Lehi (Judg 15).

3.4. Literary Criticism of Judges 14–15

The narrator of the core Samson stories introduces the hearer and reader to the protagonist rather abruptly. Samson immediately sees and wants what he is not supposed to have, that is, a foreign woman/wife, and he wastes no time in demanding one from his parents who disapprove of their son's desire (Judg 14:1–3).[335] Yet unbeknownst to the characters inside the story, the narrator informs the audience outside the story that Yhwh is using this occasion to pick a fight with the Philistines (Judg 14:4).[336] This opening scene (Judg 14:1–4) is filled with intertextuality and sophisticated wordplay.[337] For example, the downward (ירד) and upward (עלה) movement of Samson functions as a

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[333] Edward L. Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," *ABD* 6:968–71.

[334] For polysemy, Noegel examines contronymic polysemy, *double entendres*, antanaclasis, unidirectional polysemy, multidirectional polysemy, double polysemy, bilingual polysemy, polysemy clusters, isopsephy, noṭariqon, acrostics, transposition, and amphiboly. For paronomasia, he examines homoeopropheron, homoioteleuton, anastrophe, epanastrophe, parasonance, homonymic paronomasia, numerical paronomasia, bilingual paronomasia, anagrammatic paronomasia, hendiadic paronomasia, rhyme, and geminate parallelism and clustering. See Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient*, 155–294.

[335] Niditch, "Samson as Cultural Hero," 617–21; Gary N. Knoppers, "Sex, Religion, and Politics"; and Mobley, "Samson and the Three Women," 187–90.

[336] Paris, "Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4."

[337] See above (pp. 29–34) for the distinction between author-oriented (i.e., direct literary connections) and reader-oriented (i.e., indirect literary connections) intertextuality.

literary framework for the rest of the core stories and blurs the lines between Israelite and Philistine territory as he both descends (Judg 14:1, 5, 7, 10, 19; 15:8, 11, 12) and ascends (Judg 14:2, 19; 15:6, 9, 10, 13) throughout the northern Shephelah.[338] According to Steven Weitzman, then, the Samson stories not only "delegitimize Philistine claims to this region and stigmatize border-crossing" but they "construct a border, one that relies on the resources of story-telling to redefine the shephelah as social space, clarify the allegiances of the population living there, and impose Judahite hegemony."[339]

Therefore, Samson's first act is to descend (ירד) into Timnah, where he sees (ראה) a woman (אשה) whom the narrator notes was "from the daughters of the Philistines" (Judg 14:1).[340] The two consecutive verbs in the Qal form and the repetition of Timnah split the verse into two parallel sections, highlighting the intertwined themes of movement and sight throughout the Samson stories. Thus, Samson wastes no time in telling his parents, "A woman I *saw* in Timnah" (אשה ראיתי בתמנתה), only then to demand that they get her as a wife (אשה) for him (Judg 14:2). Samson's persistent desire for a woman (אשה) in the stories (Judg 14:1, 2, 3; 16:1, 4) and penchant for fire (אש) in the earlier and later texts (Judg 13:20; 14:15; 15:4–6, 14; 16:9) create a paronomastic relationship between these similar looking and sounding but different words, both of which nevertheless prove dangerous to the hero of the story. Consequently, Alter notes how the "appeal of the game of love for Samson is precisely that it is playing with fire.

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[338] Mobley, "Samson and the Three Women," 184–85; Steve Weitzman, "The Samson Story as Border Fiction," *BibInt* 10.2 (2002): 158–74; Weitzman, "Crossing the Border"; Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between"; and Thomas, "Samson Went Down."

[339] Weitzman, "Samson Story," 163.

[340] The LXX^A includes "and she was pleasing before him" (καὶ ἤρεσεν ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ).

That idiom itself is not biblical, but the Samson story abounds in fire images—the flame in which the announcing angel ascends to heaven, the fire that consumes Samson's wife and her father's house, the torches bound to the fox-tails that carry conflagration through the Philistine fields, the ropes binding Samson that snap like flax in flame—so that fire is at once associated with the powerfully destructive energy he exerts and with the destruction he courts."[341]

After the parents of Samson protest their son's troubling desire, hoping he will instead reconsider one of his own kin, Samson again demands the foreign woman from Timnah, stating "because she is right in my eyes" (כי־היא ישרה בעיני) (Judg 14:3), a repeated theme throughout the Samson stories and the DH in general.[342] Therefore, sight functions as a leitmotif in the Samson stories as does movement.[343] The authors create a close connection, then, between Samson's sight and action throughout the core stories (Judg 14:1, 2, 3, 8, 11), which was likely expanded with the scribal additions of Judg 16 and Judg 13.[344] Furthermore, this connection is reflected in the final chapters of the book of Judges when the narrator's ominous refrain about the people of Israel harks back to Samson: "In those days, there was no king in Israel. A man would do what was *right in his eyes*" (בימים ההם אין מלך בישראל איש הישר בעיניו יעשה) (Judg 17:6; 21:25).[345] The

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[341] Alter, "Samson without Folklore," 50–51.

[342] For more, see Exum, "Samson's Women"; Camp, "Riddlers, Tricksters and Strange Women"; and Mobley, "Samson the Three Women."

[343] Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 249–50; Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*, 207–13; Schneider, *Judges*, 207; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 366.

[344] J. Cheryl Exum, "Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga, Part 1" and "Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga, Part 2," in *Samson and Delilah – Selected Essays*, Hebrew Bible Monograph 87 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020), 23–59.

destructive and reckless behavior of Samson, and by extension, Israel, reveals their

inability "to see" (ראה) clearly in the book of Judges and the DH more broadly (cf. Deut

6:18), leading Edward Greenstein to argue that the Samson story functions in the DH as

an allegory that "epitomizes and personifies the story of the diffuse tribes of Israel vis-à-

vis their Lord."[346] It is perhaps for this reason that the rabbis would later note how

"Samson rebelled using his eyes" (t.Sot 3:15 L.) and "Samson followed his eyes,

therefore the Philistines gouged them out" (Sot 1:8).[347]

However, the clearest example of sophisticated wordplay in this opening scene is

the narrator's use of a *hapax legomenon* in Judg 14:4 when describing how Samson's

desire for a foreign woman was, in fact, part of the divine plan all along. According to the

narrator, Yhwh sought an "occasion" or "pretext" (תאנה) from the Philistines, either to

induce Samson's desire of a foreign woman (pretext) or to simply take advantage of that

desire (occasion) to accomplish the divine will, raising the moral and theological stakes

of the story.[348] The root word אנה ("to befall") is used in a variety of ways throughout the

Bible, including for accidental death (Exod 21:13) or harm (Prov 12:21) and for

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[345] Bachmann, *Judges*, 166, 193; Boling, *Judges*, 229; Butler, *Judges*, 139; Fox, *The Former Prophets*, 208, 216; Nelson, *Judges*, 246; Schneider, *Judges*, 203–04; Spronk, *Judges*, 412–13; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 366.

[346] Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 254. The condemnation of the leaders who "do evil in the eyes of Yhwh" is a common trope in the DH (1 Sam 15:19; 2 Sam 11:27; 1 Kgs 11:6, 15:25–26, 33–34; 16:18–19, 25, 30; 21:25; 22:52–53; 2 Kgs 3:1–2; 8:16–18, 26–27; 13:1–2, 10–11; 14:23–24; 15:8–9, 17–18, 23–24, 27–28; 16:2; 17:1–2; 21:1–2; 19–20; 23:31–32, 36–37; 24:8–9, 18–19).

[347] For more, see Ronit Nikolsky, "Rabbinic Discourse about Samson: Continuity and Change between the Tannaitic Culture to the Amoraic," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 101–18.

[348] The polysemic meanings of the Hebrew word (תאנה) are reflected in the different Greek translations. Thus, LXX[A] reads "ὅτι ἀνταπόδομα αὐτοῦ ἐκζητεῖ ἐκ τῶν ἀλλοφύλων" ("that he was seeking *repayment* from the Philistines") and LXX[B] reads "ὅτι ἐκδίκησιν αὐτὸς ζητεῖ ἐκ τῶν ἀλλοφύλων" ("that he was seeking *vengeance* from the Philistines"). The end of Judg 14:4 in LXX[A] includes "*the sons of* Israel" (τῶν υἱῶν Ισραηλ).

instigating conflict with an enemy (2 Kgs 5:7).[349] Yet the most pertinent meaning for the verb (תאנה) is its use as a noun (תאנתה) by the prophet Jeremiah when he compares the idolatry of Judah (Jer 2:20–25) with the lust of a wild donkey in heat (Jer 2:24) and desire for foreign women (Jer 2:25). Thus, Jeremiah declares:

> Who can restrain **her lust** (תאנתה)? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her. Keep your feet from going unshod and your throat from thirst. But you said, "It is hopeless, for I have loved strangers, and after them I will go." (Jer 2:23–25 NRSV)

In both Judg 14:4 and Jer 2:24, Samson and Judah "seek" (בקש) foreign women and the sinful idolatry that they represent, especially in these Deuteronomistic texts which are marked by unique vocabulary (תאנה).[350] There is even an intriguing connection between the "choice vine" (שרק) described by the prophet (Jer 2:21) and the Sorek Valley (נחל שרק) in the Samson stories (Judg 16:4–22), both of which are associated with the dangerous wiles of foreign women. Moreover, vineyards (כרמים) in general are mentioned elsewhere in the book of Judges and associated with idolatrous worship and dubious marriages, for example, the harvest festival of Baal by the lords of Shechem (Judg 9:27), the vineyards of Timnah where Samson's foreign wife resides and where he releases the torched foxes (Judg 14:5; 15:4–5), and the violent abduction of women in Shiloh by the Benjaminites during the festival of Yhwh (Judg 21:19–21).[351] Hence, the narrator of the Samson stories foreshadows in one word the ensuing conflict between Samson and the

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[349] Paris, "Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4," 81–83.

[350] For those who argue that these texts are Deuteronomistic, see Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah: Struggles for Authority in Deutero-Jeremianic Prose*. OTS. London: T&T Clark, 2003; Mark Leuchter, *Josiah's Reform and Jeremiah's Scroll: Historical Calamity and Prophetic Response*, Hebrew Bible Monograph 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006); and Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists."

[351] Webb, *Book of Judges*, 367.

Philistines and Samson's desire for foreign women (Judg 14:4), itself a cipher for Israel's desire to worship foreign gods in the DH (Deut 7:1–6; Josh 23:11–13; Judg 3:1–7; 1 Kgs 11:1–13).[352]

This type of wordplay, which draws upon animal metaphors and sexual euphemisms, is used again at the end of the chapter when the Philistine companions at Samson's wedding extort the answer to Samson's riddle from his Timnite wife (Judg 14:15). Hayim Tawil underscores the possible Akkadian and Hebrew connection in the author's use of חָרַשׁ ("plow") in Judges 14:18β, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle," with the Akkadian word *erēšu* ("plow"), seen for example in a famous proverb from Armana, "my field, for lack of plowing, is like a woman without a husband" (EA 74:17–19; 75:15–17; 81:37–38; 90:42–43), both of which connect the language of plowing and sex.[353] However, Tawil does not note the paronomasia between the singular form of the rare word חֶרֶס ("sun") with חָרַשׁ ("plow") and *erēšu* ("plow")—all of which occurs in only a single verse (Judg 14:18).[354]

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[352] Gary Knoppers argued that the Deuteronomist(s) used the issue of mixed marriages as a *topos* to explain two major downfalls in ancient Israel's history, namely the period of the judges and the divided monarchy (Knoppers, "Sex, Religion, and Politics," 136). Susan Niditch notes the additional challenges of exogamy in the Samson stories due to the "special ethnic animosity" between ancient Israelites and Philistines imagined by the biblical authors (Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, 618).

[353] Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 121. For more on the connection between the language of plowing and sex, see Yoram Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age*, ed. Andrew George, WAW 29 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012).

[354] In the Bible, חֶרֶס only gets used four times (Deut 28:27; Judg 8:13; 14:18; Job 9:7). In one of those instances, Weinfeld draws a connection between the curses listed in Deuteronomy and Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (VTE). In particular, he lines up Deut 28:27 with VTE 419–421 (§39): "May Sin, the brightness of Heaven and Earth clothe you with leprosy and forbid your entering into the presence of the gods or king. Roam the desert like the wild-ass and the gazelle!" and Deut 28:28–29 with VTE 422–424 (§40): "May Shamash, the light of heaven and earth, not judge you justly. May he remove your eyesight. Walk about in darkness!" Thus, the otherwise inexplicable relationship between the divine punishment of skin diseases, blindness, and lawlessness in Deut 28:27–29 is elucidated by the same type of curses in Esarhaddon's treaty formulas. Moreover, allusions to many of the same themes in the Samson stories are plentiful, particularly the man punished with blindness (Deut 28:28), groping in the dark with no deliverer

According to Robin Baker, this type of sophisticated wordplay abounds in the book of Judges. He even argues that Samson's riddle (חידה) and Jotham's parable (משל) are not only intentionally positioned on either side of the scroll's center, but function as the interpretive keys for unlocking the hidden meaning behind the entire work, which has been guarded from prying and unworthy eyes, like the *apkallu* of Mesopotamia, mythical sages who symbolically stood guard at the royal entrances of Neo-Assyrian doorways.[355] Baker argues for even deeper wordplay in Samson's response to the Philistines by drawing further meaning from the Hebrew חָרַשׁ with the Akkadian cognate *ḫarāṣu* (CAD Ḫ 92b) to reveal something more esoteric:

> *Ḫarāṣu* takes as its primary meaning 'cutting down', 'cutting deep' whence it developed the significations, as in Hebrew and Phoenician, 'to plough' and 'to engrave'. From this, the Akkadian word developed the secondary meaning 'to make clear'. Understanding 'if you hadn't ploughed with my heifer' as a sexual metaphor has long been a commonplace of biblical exegesis as well as popular lore. But Samson means 'cut deep below the surface' and, thus, bring to light. And still the wordplay is not exhausted: the Hebrew near-homophone *ḥereš* conveys both 'silent' and 'secret', and 'magician'.[356]

The wordplay continues in the following scene with Samson's iconic encounter with a roaring lion in the vineyards of Timnah (Judg 14:5–9). Thus, while Samson and his parents travel down to Timnah to visit his Philistine bride (Judg 14:5, 7–9), he is ambushed by a roaring "young lion" (כפיר אריות), which the narrator draws attention to

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in sight (Deut 28:29), whose wife is given to another (Deut 28:30), and who is oppressed and crushed by a foreign enemy all the days of his life (Deut 28:32–34). VTE 545–46 (§68) even makes an interesting connection between Shamash and plowing: "May Shamash with an iron plough [overtur]n yo[ur] city and your district." However, the word for "plough" is *epinnu* (GIŠ.APIN), not *erēšu*. For more, see Moshe Weinfeld, "Traces of Assyrian Treaty Formulae in Deuteronomy," *Biblica* 46 (1965): 417–27.

[355] Baker, *Hollow Men, Strange Women*, 33–37.

[356] Baker, *Hollow Men, Strange Women*, 35 (n. 153). Compare Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 121.

with the common demonstrative particle הנה ("behold").[357] During the attack, the spirit of

Yhwh rushes upon Samson for the first time and he proceeds to tear the lion apart with

his bare hands (Judg 14:5–6).[358] Upon his return home from Timnah, Samson notices a

"swarm of bees" (עדת דבורים) and "honey" (דבש) in "the carcass of the lion" (מפלת האריה)

that he ripped apart, from which he scrapes and eats the honey, then shares it with his

unsuspecting parents (Judg 14:8–10). These verses are often troublesome for interpreters

due to the somewhat confusing nature of when, where, and who is traveling to and from

Timnah. Yet the problem is largely solved by appealing to the LXX^A and LXX^B in which

a key verb is changed from a Hebrew third person plural (יבאו) to a Greek third person

singular (ἦλθεν), so that Samson's parents do not witness the slaying of the lion and the

subsequent honey that forms in its carcass.[359] Apart from these text-critical issues, this

part of the story is also filled with inner-biblical allusions and wordplay.

Once again, there is the thematic downward and upward movement when Samson

and his parents travel to and from Timnah to visit his Philistine bride (Judg 14:5, 7, 9). As

noted above, the biblical town of Timnah (Gen 38:12–14; Josh 15:10, 57; 19:43; Judg

14:1–2, 5; 2 Chr 28:18) is the site of another biblical story (Gen 38) where an Israelite

man (Judah) found himself in a precarious situation with a foreign woman (Tamar),

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[357] Brent Strawn translates the odd construct כפיר אריות in Judg 14:5 as "subadult (nomadic) lion," based on information from the Hebrew Bible and zoology. While Strawn's intention is to suggest that the author used unique zoological knowledge to heighten the impressive nature of Samson's feat, his translation unknowingly provides an analogy to Samson who is himself like a wild nomad in his prime. For more, see Brent Strawn, "kĕpîr 'ărāyôt in Judges 14:5," *VT* 59 (2009): 150–58.

[358] See above for how "the spirit of Yhwh" (רוח יהוה) functions in the Samson stories and the rest of the DH.

[359] See Moore, Judges, 329–33; Simpson, *Composition*, 53–63, 113–18; Boling, *Judges*, 230; Gese, "ältere Simsonüberlieferung," 264–65; Groß, *Richter*, 652–53; and Spronk, *Judges*, 383–94.

possibly revealing a shared textual tradition behind both texts.[360] The narrator notes that

Samson and his parents traveled "to the vineyards of Timnah," a setting filled with

symbolism in the Bible, especially in a story that will eventually transform its main

character into a Nazirite who is forbidden to drink wine or eat anything that comes from

the vine (Judg 13:4, 7, 14; 16:17). In addition to being a staple in the cultural and

economic life of ancient Israel, vineyards were a site for potential trouble in the book of

Judges (Judg 9:27; 11:33; 15:5; 21:19–21) and the DH in general (Deut 28:15, 30, 39; 1

Sam 8:14–15; 22:7; 1 Kgs 21; 2 Kgs 5:25–27; 18:31–33).[361] Vineyards and their

intoxicating fruit are rich with figurative language for biblical authors, including the

scribes who composed the Samson stories. Thus, as Sasson wryly notes about these

precarious scenes: "For Hebrew narrators, intoxication can serve as the instrument by

which to reveal the character of individuals. Thus when we meet Samson, he is either at

banquets out-drinking the Philistines or near vineyards flexing his muscles. That Samson

loses his sight, but also rediscovers God, when with Delilah of Nahal Šoreq—that is,

'Choice Vines Gulch'—is a delicious touch in a narrative about a man meant to be a

nazirite from his mother's womb."[362]

Vineyards are not the only symbolic imagery and language filled with meaning in

this opening verse. Samson's encounter with the roaring young lion is perhaps the most

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[360] Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between," 78–84; and idem, "Tamar, Delilah, and a Nameless Timnite."

[361] Carey Ellen Walsh, *The Fruit of the Vine: Viticulture in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

[362] Jack M. Sasson, "The Blood of Grapes," in *Drinking Ancient Societies: History and Culture of Drinks in the Ancient Near East*, History of the Ancient Near East Studies VI, ed. Lucio Milano (Padua: Sargon, 1994), 406.

iconic of all the scenes in the Samson stories.[363] But it is not unique; rather it draws upon a rich tapestry of symbolism and traditions, both oral and written, from the ancient Near East, including the Bible. Of the more than two hundred texts that employ lions or leonine imagery in the Bible, the young lions (כפיר) who roar (שאג) before attacking their prey is a common trope to signify powerful people, positively for allies or negatively for enemies (e.g., Is 5:29; 31:4; Jer 2:15; 51:38; Ezek 19:1–9; Amos 3:4, 8; Nah 2:11–13; Zech 11:3), and Samson is no exception.[364] Lions and leonine imagery is ubiquitous in the ancient Near East for both gods and kings, especially during the Neo-Assyrian period, as seen, for example, in the royal seals of King Sargon II (see Fig. 3.1) across the empire and the North Palace reliefs of King Ashurbanipal in Nineveh (see Fig. 3.2).[365] These images of kings slaying lions, whether large or small, clay or stone, were not only public displays of divine and royal power, they were also confirmations of royal attributes and training, including literacy (cf. Deut 17:18–19).[366] Chikako Esther Wantanabe describes the particular seal (Fig. 3.1) and relief (Fig. 3.2) shown below as follows:

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[363] For an overview of the reception history of this scene, see Gunn, *Judges*, 199–203.

[364] G. Johannes Botterweck, "אֲרִי *'ǎrî*," *TDOT* I:374–88; Brent A. Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion?: Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East*, OBO 212 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); Strawn, "*kĕpîr' ărāyôt*"; and Groß, *Richter*, 688–90.

[365] Strawn, *What is Stronger*, 131–230; and Chikako Esther Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia: A Contextual Approach*, WOO 1 (Vienna: Institut für Orientalistik, 2002).

[366] Note how the "specific way in which the king is depicted in the lion hunt, dressed as a crown prince and equipped with the stylus and the sword, allows Assurbanipal to remind the viewers—of the actual spectacle as well as of the reliefs—of the wide range of qualities and skills necessary to fulfil the role of king: a royal education, after all, demanded no less than training as a warrior and a scholar." Silvie Zamazalová, "The Education of Neo-Assyrian Princes," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 313–30.

It is noteworthy that the lion in both types is shown with its right front paw raised and its mouth wide open. […] The king himself is as fierce as the lion that represents maximum danger, so that he is capable of harming and killing anyone, even the strong and enraged lion shown in the scene. The king's fierce and heroic aspects as a 'warrior' are explained and embodied in this way by the lion, whom he faces and kills. The king's action and quality are thus 'seen through' the posture of the lion, which functions as a metaphoric medium to evoke implications from associated commonplaces.[367]

According to the iconography and textual traditions of the Neo-Assyrian empire, the type of power it takes to slay the strongest beasts in the animal kingdom ultimately derives from the gods themselves.[368] The power of Ninurta, for example, the fierce and eternal warrior god of the Assyrian empire, was described as having "the strength of a lion" in terms of the "lion's body and lion's muscle."[369] Lions also played an important part in cultic and cultural demonstrations in the ancient Near East.[370] The royal lion hunt, for example, was followed by elaborate drinking rituals signifying a ceremonial slaughter and sacrifice of these wild animals, which can be seen in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs of Ashurbanipal.[371] An Assyrian relief from the Northwest Palace in Nimrud even displays the pelts of lions worn by priests during religious ceremonies, which likely explains the bones and other remains of lions discovered in cultic sites.[372]

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[367] Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia*, 55.

[368] Paul Collins, "Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Violence: Warfare in Neo-Assyrian Art," in *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, ed. Brian A. Brown and Marian H. Feldman (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 619–44.

[369] Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia*, 89–90. Cf. "Ninurta" with "Nimrod" in Gen 10:8–12.

[370] Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia*, 77; and Collins, "Gods, Heroes," 629–30.

[371] Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia*, 77–78; and Collins, "Gods, Heroes," 629.

[372] Oded Borowski, *Every Living Thing – Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 198; and Collins, "Gods, Heroes," 629–30.

Figure 3.1. King Sargon II Slaying a Lion.

Figure 3.2. King Ashurbanipal Slaying a Lion.

117

Lion remains and possible cultic paraphernalia depicting lions have also been found at sites in and around Iron Age Israel and Judah, including lion bones in an altar complex at Dan, an amulet portraying a lion at Ekron (Tel Miqne), and a bronze lion statuette at Arad.[373] The use of leonine imagery for divine and royal symbolism is also reflected throughout the Bible.[374] Of the hundreds of texts that evoke the images and language of lions in the Bible, Brent Strawn notes how the lion is an universal and polyvalent symbol that is "dependent on the primary aspects of *threat* and *power*."[375] Indeed, these aspects of threat and power are clearly seen when Samson slays and rips apart the roaring young lion who attacks him in the vineyards of Timnah (Judg 14:5–6). Furthermore, the author also notes how Samson "tore it apart as one tears apart a kid" (וישסעהו כשסע הגדי) (Judg 14:6). This type of animal compared with the lion, that is, a "kid" (גדי), returns when Samson returns to Timnah to visit his estranged wife with a kid (Judg 15:1) and when Samson's parents sacrifice a kid for the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:15).[376] According to the biblical authors, then, Samson does not require a weapon to kill this formidable beast, but only the spirit of Yhwh (Judg 14:6)—sending a clear message to those familiar with the royal iconography and legends of Neo-Assyrian kings.

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[373] Borowski, *Every Living Thing*, 226–27.

[374] Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Augsbug Fortress, 1998), 186–91. See also the dozens of references of lions in the subject index in Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods,* 62–63.

[375] Strawn, *What is Stronger*, 26–27.

[376] The author uses a generic article with the collective singular "as one rends *a kid*" (כשסע הגדי), which is common with comparisons to animals (Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 244). Cf. Hebrew גְּדִי with Akkadian *gadû* (Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 64). For more on the role these types of goats played in domestic and cultic life in ancient Israel, see Borowski, *Every Living Thing*, 61–66, 211–30.

In addition to the themes of threat and power, the identities of Samson are invoked through the "*polyvalent symbol*" of the lion. During Jacob's deathbed promises to his sons, for example, he says to Judah: "Judah is a lion's whelp, from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a great lion, who dares stand up to him?" (Gen 49:9). Likewise, in his final blessings to Israel, Moses says to the tribe of Dan: "Dan is a whelp of lions leaping forth from Bashan!" (Deut 33:22). In both texts, each of which is a type of prophetic blessing (Gen 49:9; Deut 33:22), Samson's power and strength are foretold in his different ancestral identities. Among these echoes of famous figures from the past, Samson's connection to David is deepened by both of their abilities to slay lions (1 Sam 17:32–37). Hence, Samson, like David and Jonathan, is even stronger than a lion (2 Sam 1:23; cf. Judg 14:18) and akin to another heroic lion slayer, Benaiah son of Jehoiada (2 Sam 23:20), one of David's mighty men. Intriguingly, the unique phrase, "nothing in his hand" (אין ביד), which describes Samson killing the lion barehanded (Judg 14:6), is only used in the Bible for Samson and David, and only found in Judg 14:6 and 1 Sam 17:50.[377]

Leonine imagery for royal and divine figures can be found elsewhere in the DH. For example, under the orders of Solomon (1 Kgs 7:13–14), Hiram, the bronzeworker from Tyre, prominently placed lions and mythical winged creatures called cherubim with the columns of the temple (1 Kgs 7:27–37) and on the golden throne of the palace in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 10:18–20), similar to the type of imagery on Neo-Assyrian palace and

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[377] Spronk, *Judges*, 415; and Strawn, "*kĕpîr' ărāyôt*," 151.

temple reliefs, which also displayed lions and mythical winged creatures called *kurību*

with their columns and thrones to guard their sacred spaces (see Fig. 3.3; Fig. 3.4).[378]

Figure 3.3. A Lamassu Guarding the Throne Room Entrance of King Sargon II.

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[378] Johanna Tudeau, *Building in Assyria – A Philological Perspective*, Schriften zur Vorderasiatischen Archäologie 14 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 113–16, 147–50.

Figure 3.4. A Banquet Scene with King Ashurbanipal.

In other words, the later Deuteronomistic authors writing about the magnificent palace and temple of Solomon—from a largely imagined past—appear to mirror and even subvert the same type of imagery likely known to them elsewhere in the Neo-Assyrian empire.[379] Whether it was the ability to slay lions (Judg 14:6; 1 Sam 17:32–37), read and write like the scribal elite (Deut 17:18–19), or oversee the building of spectacular structures (1 Kgs 6–10), the authors and editors of the DH exhibited royal ideology

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[379] For the function of that imagery in royal contexts, see Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia*, 42–56; and David Kertai, "The Art of Building a Late Assyrian Royal Palace," in *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, ed. Brian A. Brown and Marian H. Feldman (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 689–712. Note the similarity in the relief depicting the banquet scene of Ashurbanipal with the description of Solomon's palace features, for example, the lions in the legs of the throne (cf. 1 Kgs 7:28, 29, 36) and the pomegranates in the lattices overhanging the king (cf. 1 Kgs 7:18, 20, 42).

similar to that of the Neo-Assyrian empire in their evolving scribal history of the leaders

of Israel and Judah.[380] As Gary Knoppers noted:

> By constructing a Solomon in the tenth century who enjoys unmitigated success in domestic politics, international commerce, and national cult, the Deuteronomist provides ideological justification for monarchical ambitions in the eighth-seventh centuries. For the Deuteronomist, the problems of the divided monarchy are not intrinsic to the monarchy itself. The unified and highly successful Israel of David and Solomon demonstrates the superiority of royal polity over previous polities. Indeed, Israel itself, as the Deuteronomist defines it, is largely a product of the Davidic-Solomonic age. The institutions of temple, Davidic dynasty, and Jerusalem were sanctioned as permanent not only by all Israelites, but also by YHWH himself.[381]

The close relationship, then, between the gods and kings in Neo-Assyrian

iconography and texts, what Peter Machinist describes as "the primary nexus between

heaven and earth," is not only present in the royal texts of the DH, but in the core Samson

stories as well.[382] This can be seen in Samson's endowment of the spirit of Yhwh to

battle beasts (Judg 14:6) and ability to outwit (Judg 14:12–14; 15:1–5) and vanquish

(Judg 14:19; 15:14–20) the enemies of Israel empowered by the same (Judg 14:19; 15:14,

17) or related god (Judg 15:19).[383] However, the symbolic function of the lion does not

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[380] See Sandra L. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology - leshakken shemo sham in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 318 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002); Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and Prophecy in Joshua–Kings: A Near Eastern Perspective," in *Israelite Prophecy and the Deuteronomistic History: Portrait, Reality, and the Formation of a History*, ed. Mignon R. Jacobs and Raymond F. Person, AIL 14 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 103–28; Knoppers, "History and Historiography"; and idem, "From Israel to Judah." For an overview of Neo-Assyrian royal ideology, see Peter Machinist, "Kingship and Divinity in Imperial Assyria," in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis, BJS 346 (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2008), 152–88.

[381] Gary N. Knoppers, *Two Nations Under God – The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies, Volume 1 – The Reign of Solomon and the Rise of Jeroboam*, HSM 52 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 133.

[382] Machinist, "Kingship and Divinity," 182–88 [186].

[383] For an examination of divinity in the Samson stories and the book of Judges in general, see Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, "Binding Samson to Yhwh: From Disorder to Order in the Samson Cycle," in

end after Samson rips it apart, nor does the author's use of wordplay, since the dead lion produces one of the most perplexing aspects of the Samson stories: the honey (ארי) that emerges from its lifeless, rotting body.[384] That honey becomes the center of Samson's famous riddle in the next scene featuring his wedding to the Timnite woman (Judg 14:10–18). However, before Samson and his parents make their way down to that contentious arrangement (Judg 14:3), he initiates a game of secrets with his parents and soon-to-be Philistine bride (Judg 14:6, 9, 16), something that will prove costly for everyone involved.

Thus, after Samson slays the lion in the Timnite vineyards, the narrator notes that "he did not tell his father and his mother what he had done" (הגיד לאביו ולאמו את אשר עשה) (Judg 14:6), beginning a series of deadly secrets, especially between Samson and the women with whom he is intimately involved. This comment by the narrator (ולא הגיד) uses the perfect aspect of the verb נגד ("to be conspicuous" or "to tell"), which is used again when Samson hides (Judg 16:18) and then reveals (Judg 16:18) the secret of his

God and Gods in the Deuteronomistic History, ed. Corrine Carvalho and John L. McLaughlin, CBQI 2 (Washington, DC: CBA 2021), 49–68; and Mark S. Smith, "Retrospective Deities in Judges: Memory and Amnesia about 'Other Gods,'" in *God and Gods in the Deuteronomistic History*, ed. Corrine Carvalho and John L. McLaughlin, CBQI 2 (Washington, DC: CBA 2021), 69–103.

[384] Some scholars argue that the "honey" (ארי) was a homonym for an ancient semitic word for "lion" (ארי). For example, when examining Song 5:1, Marvin Pope noted that the "verb ʾry occurs in Scripture only here and in Ps 80:13[12E] and is usually taken to mean 'gather, pluck,' or the like on the basis of the Ethiopic cognate and its use in Mishnaic Hebrew for plucking figs. In Arabic the noun ʾary is used of honey and ʾiry, ʾariy designates a manger, while the verb may apply to making honey, driving clouds and bringing rain, or eating at the same manger (with another animal). […] The association here with honey recalls Samson's riddle, Judg 14:14, and its solution. H. Bauer (1912) recognized the nominal play on ʾry in the senses of 'honey' and 'lion,' but overlooked the verbal play on ʾry in the sense of 'eat.' In the solution to the riddle a thoughtless scribe, not understanding the play substituted another word for 'honey,' děbaš (Arabic *dibs*, Akkadian *dišpu*), according to Bauer. J. R. Porter (1962) supposed that the pun depended on the fact that the old word for 'honey,' ʾary, was no longer in use when Samson posed his riddle. Samson at least knew three meanings for the root ʾry and packed them all into a triple play: From the eater issued eats, From the strong issued sweets." Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, AB 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 504–05. According to J.C. de Moor, it also has a parallel in Ugaritic (J.C. de Moor, "'ar 'Honey-Dew'" *UF* 7 [1975], 590–91).

strength to Delilah, as well as when the messenger of Yhwh does not reveal his name to

Samson's parents (Judg 13:6).[385] This form of the verb is also used for other prominent

figures in the DH who have a tendency to conceal important information.[386] It is used by

Saul, for example, when he conceals from his uncle (1 Sam 10:16) that he was anointed

by Samuel to be the "leader" (נגיד) over Israel (1 Sam 10:1).[387] That form of the verb is

also used to describe when Jonathan, the son of Saul, "did not tell" (לא הגיד) his father

that he and his armor bearer were going to attack the Philistines near Gibeah (1 Sam

14:1). It is also used as a double negative by Solomon to showcase his wisdom when

answering the riddles of the Queen of Sheba, since "there was nothing hidden from the

king that he could not tell her" (לא־היה דבר נעלם מן־המלך אשר לא הגיד לה) (1 Kgs 10:3).

    Secrets permeate these texts and many others in the Samson stories, leading

Niditch to conclude that "[s]ecrecy allows for deception and trickery, underscoring

Samson's character as a loner and his group's alienation from the Philistines."[388] In

addition to emphasizing Samson's character as a loner, this language of secrecy may also

reveal some of the redactional seams in the text and help explain the confusion of where

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[385] The verb נגד is used multiple times in the Samson stories, especially those about Samson's relationship with the Timnite woman and Delilah (Judg 13:6, 10; 14:2, 6, 9, 12–17, 19; 16:6, 10, 13, 15, 17–18).

[386] In addition to those listed here, there is the possible example of David's prayer against Ahithophel on the Mount of Olives in 2 Sam 15:31. However, most scholars recognize an error in the MT. Hence, McCarter notes the following: "We read *wldwd hwgd*, lit. 'And it had been told to David.' MT has *wdwd hgyd*, 'And David had told,' but *wldwd* is attested by MT[MSS], LXX[LMN], Syr., Targ., Vulg., and 4QSam[a] ([*w*]*ldwy*[*d*]), and *hwgd* (so MT[MS]) is supported by LXX[BAMN], Syr., Targ., and Vulg." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 366.

[387] There is an interesting form of paronomasia between the two similar sounding and meaning words here that are nevertheless different: נגד ("be conspicuous") and נגיד ("leader"). For more on the נגיד in Monarchic Israel, see Baruch Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy in Israel*, HSM 25 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 1–11.

[388] Niditch, *Judges*, 156.

and when Samson's parents are present during the marital arrangements and celebrations around Timnah, since the phrase "he did not tell" (לא הגיד) is used three separate times in the story (Judg 14:6, 9, 16).[389] These secrets may also have a larger interpretive function in tandem with the riddles for understanding the ways in which special knowledge is concealed and revealed by the authors of the Samson stories and the book of Judges in general.[390] This becomes clearer as the theme of secrecy plays a central part in each of the major sections of the Samson stories (Judg 13:6, 17–18; 14:6, 9, 12–18; 16:4–20).

Following the incident with the lion (Judg 14:6), there is another thematic descent by Samson when he travels to Timnah again, speaks with the Philistine woman, and confirms that she is right in his eyes (Judg 14:7; cf. Judg 14:3). As noted above, the latter is a leitmotif in the Samson stories and the DH in general, as it spells danger for those who trust their own judgement rather than that of Yhwh (Deut 6:18). According to the Deuteronomists, then, the Israelites who follow other gods in the land and disobey the

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[389] Azzan Yadin, "SAMSON'S *ḤÎDÂ*" *VT* 52 (2002): 407–26. For example, Yadin argues the following: "In v. 5 Samson's parents are accompanying him to Timnah and present when the lion attacks, yet in the very next verse they appear to be absent and wholly unaware of the incident. The same phrase, 'he did not tell (*lo' higgîd*)' appears again in v. 9, when Samson keeps the origin of the honey secret from his parents, and again in v. 16, when Samson's new bride coaxes him to reveal the *ḥîdâ*, but he refuses (at first) saying: 'Behold, I have not told (*lo' higgadtî*) my father nor my mother, shall I tell you?' […] On my reading, the answer to this puzzle lies in the redactor's need to integrate the appended lion and honey episodes into the broader narrative, working 'backwards' from v. 16 to vv. 6 and 9. In v. 16 Samson explicitly states that he has not told his parents the *ḥîdâ*, i.e., has not told them the saying that caps his challenge—'What is sweeter than honey, what is stronger than a lion.' The later redactor, seeking to frame the *ḥîdâ* exchange as a riddle-response involving the lion and honey episodes he provides, retrojects Samson's statement in v. 16 ('I have not told my father nor my mother') back onto these episodes. The result is the two 'he did not tell' clauses in vv. 6 and 9 that link the *ḥîdâ* and to the earlier (but redactionally subsequent) explanatory episodes. The resulting reading has Samson 'not telling' his parents in vv. 6 and 9, and then referring to this 'not telling' in v. 16. There is no question that the interpolation in v. 6 is 'fit into the story very ill,' but the redactor is willing to pay the price of this textual infelicity to better integrate these episodes into the *ḥîdâ* narrative and thus make sense of the otherwise incoherent exchange between Samson and the Philistines." Yadin, "SAMSON'S *ḤÎDÂ*," 424–25.

[390] Baker, "Hollow Men," 38–39.

commandments of Yhwh are given into the hands of their enemies (Judg 2:11–23).[391] The fact that this happens repeatedly and with increasing severity from one tribe and judge to the next may be a form of cultural amnesia by the authors describing cultic contexts and foreign gods hundreds of years after those reflected in the book of Judges, something which Smith calls "retrospective deities."[392] In other words, the religious reforms of the Deuteronomists in Judah from the seventh century BCE onward are superimposed on an ancient Israelite past marked by cultic pluriformity and different deities.[393]

Nevertheless, "after some time," or perhaps "after a year" (מימים) (cf. Judg 15:1), Samson returns "to take her" (לקחתה), that is, marry the Timnite woman (Judg 14:8). This form of the verb (לקח) only gets used in the DH (Deut 24:4; 25:8; Judg 14:8; 1 Sam 24:11; 25:39; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14), and often in matters of marriage and divorce (Deut 24:4; 25:8; Judg 14:8; 1 Sam 25:39).[394] However, some unusual features in the arrangement between Samson and the Timnite woman are that the groom alone appears to choose his bride, despite the resistance from his parents (Judg 14:3), and the woman remains with her father after the wedding (Judg 15:1).[395] These features are not entirely unusual since

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[391] On the Deuteronomistic language and themes in the prologue (Judg 2:6ff), see Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 23; Campbell and O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic*, 167, 173–76; Amit, "Book of Judges," 308; Groß, 86; Niditch, *Judges*, 11, 49–50; and Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 166. Cf. A. Graeme Auld, "What Makes Judges Deuteronomistic?" in *Joshua Retold: Synoptic Perspectives*, OTS (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 120–26; and Baker, *Hollow Men*, 293–99.

[392] Smith, "Retrospective Deities in Judges," 101–03 [esp. 102].

[393] According to Smith, the different deities in the book of Judges reveals six facts: 1.) Divine names in Judges include several major deities of the West Semitic pantheon; 2.) these deities hardly reflect their roles or characteristics as known outside the Bible; 3.) two divine titles (Baal-berith, El-berith) suggest the importance of covenant among the people of Shechem; 4.) deities embedded in three personal names (Anat, Abimelech, Samson) are otherwise unknown in Judges and other biblical sources; 5.) the distribution of deities is quite uneven in Judges; and 6.) divinity in Judges is retrospective, that is, premonarchic deities are remembered in monarchic and postmonarchic ways. Smith, "Retrospective Deities in Judges," 69–71.

[394] Cf. Hebrew לָקַח with Akkadian *leqû* (Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 192).

there is some precedent, for example, in the marriage customs from the Middle Assyrian Laws (*COS* 2.132:356–57), which describe a wife remaining with her family after the wedding (e.g., §27), and in a few biblical passages, including the marital negotiations between Jacob and Laban (Gen 29) and David and Saul (1 Sam 18).[396] Following the influential work of W. Robertson Smith, many scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took the cultural comparisons even further by arguing that Samson was engaged in a marriage custom known as a *ṣadīqa* union practiced in Arabic societies where a husband periodically visited his wife who remained with her father.[397] Many scholars have since abandoned that theory. Walter Groß, for example, concludes that the comparison is problematic, not only because they are far removed from the historical contexts of the Samson stories, but they fail to pay attention to the literary context of the narrative.[398]

Thus, on his way back to Timnah, Samson turned (סור) to see the fallen body (מפלת) of the lion he tore apart earlier, only to discover a swarm of bees (עדת דבורים) and honey (דבש) in its corpse (גוית) (Judg 14:8).[399] In so doing, Samson broke, at least

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[395] For more on the marriage customs in the Samson stories and ancient Israel, see Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*, 77–92; and Tracy M. Lemos, *Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine: 1200 BCE to 200 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[396] Spronk, *Judges*, 425–26.

[397] W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1885). See, for example, Moore, Judges, 340; Budde, *Richter*, 100; Lagrange, *Le Livre des Judges*, 232; Burney, *Judges*, 354–55; and Soggin, *Judges*, 239–40.

[398] Thus, after reviewing multiple cultural comparisons, Groß concludes the following: "Alle herangezogenen Eheformanalogien sind zeitlich und kulturell weit entfernt von Ri 14+15. Die Varianten der Besuchsehe erzeugen im Blick auf Ri 14+15 mehr Probleme als sie lösen. Sumerische und altbabylonische Gesetze bezeugen eine Rechtskultur im Rahmen patrilokalen Eherechts, auf deren Hintergrund sowohl die Rolle des Brautführers, der Simsons Frau erhält, als auch die gewalttätige Reaktion sowohl Simsons wie der Philister in groben Zügen verständlich werden. Diese Analogie verdient daher den Vorzug." Groß, *Richter*, 680–85 [685].

metaphorically, one of the cardinal rules of the DH when he deviated from his intended path to turn aside and follow his eyes (cf. Deut 5:32–33; 17:11, 20; 28:14; Josh 1:7; 23:6; Judg 2:17; 2 Kgs 22:2).[400] Nonetheless, in that moment, Samson discovers the central elements to his perplexing riddle that he posits at his wedding (Judg 14:14), furthering a series of events that were seemingly planned by Yhwh (Judg 14:4).[401] The phenomenon of bees and honey in the lion's corpse is highlighted by the narrator who again uses the demonstrative particle הנה to draw the attention of the reader and hearer (cf. Judg 14:5). In both the LXX^A and LXX^B manuscripts, the translators write that Samson discovered the swarm of bees and honey "in the *mouth* of the lion" (ἐν τῷ στόματι τοῦ λέοντος) rather than in its body (σῶμα), as in the Hebrew (Judg 14:8). This alteration could be an indication of the Greek translators' desire to have Samson avoid touching the lion's corpse, as it was forbidden for a Nazirite to do (Num 6:6–12). This may also be seen in the next verse in which Samson does not "scrape" (רדה) the honey out from the body of the lion, as in the Hebrew, but rather "took it out" (ἐξεῖλεν αὐτὸ) of its mouth, as in the Greek. This type of harmonizing would make sense for the Jewish scribes who had the entire Samson story before them to translate, rather than an older and shorter version (Judg 14–15) in which his status as a Nazirite did not exist, which likely only came about

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[399] Cf. Hebrew דְּבַשׁ with Akkadian *dišpu* (Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 72) and Hebrew גְּוִיָה with Akkadian *girru* (Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 65).

[400] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic*, 332; and idem, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 326–27.

[401] For Judg 14:4 as a late insertion in the final form of the text, see Paris, "Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4."

with the later additions of Judg 13 and 16. Different interpretations of these phenomena

are also seen in the earliest reception of the story.[402]

Bees (דבורים) only appear in the Bible four times (Deut 1:44; Judg 14:8; Ps

118:12; Is 7:18), and the name Deborah (דבורה) twice, first for the nurse (מינקת) of

Rebekah in the book of Genesis (Gen 35:8) and second for the female judge and prophet

of Israel in the book of Judges (Judg 4:4, 5, 9; 10, 14; 5:7, 12, 15). Both characters named

Deborah are associated with rare trees in or around Bethel, possibly pointing to a shared

tradition.[403] The narrator also describes Deborah as the "wife of Lappidoth" (אשת לפידות),

or as Sasson translates it, "a wielder of flames" (Judg 4:4).[404] Samson's penchant for fire,

in particular the "torches" (לפדים) he uses to burn down the Philistine fields in Timnah

(Judg 15:4–5), therefore creates an interesting connection with Deborah and her own

association with fire as "a woman of torches" (cf. Gen 15:17; Exod 20:18; Judg 7:16–20;

Isa 62:1; Ezek 1:13; Dan 10:6; Nah 2:4; Zech 12:6). For some, the bees and honey

emerging from the slain body of a lion, itself the main symbol of Judah (e.g., Gen 49:9),

provides a metaphor of the emerging people of Israel and Judah during the period of the

judges between the conquest of the land and the rise of the monarchy.[405] For others, it

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[402] John Fitzgerald examines three distinct aspects about the early Jewish and Christian reception of the bees and honey in the Samson stories: 1.) differences in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin manuscripts; 2.) textual additions by early Jewish and Christian interpreters; and 3.) similarities with Greco-Roman buogonia traditions. For more, see John T. Fitzgerald, "Miscellaneous Observations on the Samson Saga with an Excursus on Bees," in *Partners with God – Theological and Critical Readings of the Bible in Honor of Marvin A. Sweeney*, ed. Shelley L. Birdsong and Serge Frolov (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2017), 63–71.

[403] Deborah the nurse of Rebekah was "buried under an oak" (תחת האלון) in Bethel (Gen 35:8) and Deborah the "wife of Lappidoth" would judge "under the palm tree" (תחת־תמר) around Bethel (Judg 4:4–5). For more, see Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 254–57; and Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges I*, 257–61.

[404] Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 250, 255–56.

reflects legendary tales of the Greco-Roman variety, particularly the buogonia

traditions—derived from the Greek word *bougonēs* ("born of an ox")—in which bees

grew inside the body of a dead cow.[406] Despite some of the similarities drawn by scholars

with these tales from antiquity, the Samson story is unique because it alone has the bees

forming inside the body of a dead lion and producing honey.[407] More importantly, within

its narrative context, the swarm of bees and honey provide the content for Samson's

riddle (Judg 14:14), to which no one other than Samson knows the answer.

The final verse before Samson and his parents arrive at the wedding celebration in

Timnah is also filled with intertextuality and wordplay. As noted above, Samson scrapes

the honey out of the body of the lion and "upon his palms" (אל־כפיו) (Judg 14:9; cf. Jer

5:31). The form of the verb רדה ("to rule") used by the author here (וירדהו) is a type of

paronomasia with the verb ירד ("to descend") used multiple times by the author

immediately before (Judg 14:1, 5, 7) and after (Judg 14:10, 19) the verse. The meaning of

the root word רדה ("to rule") also resonates with the narrator's comment about the

Philistines "ruling" (משלים) over Israel (Judg 14:4). The narrator describes how Samson

scrapes the honey from the carcass of the lion "upon his palms," a phrase that is also used

in the book of Leviticus when Yhwh is describing all the unclean animals not to touch

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[405] As Baker notes: "In his extended discussion of the ontology of viscosity, Jean-Paul Sartre terms viscous substances, such as honey, pitch, etc., 'aberrant fluids' that change constantly, but don't change, that have the 'suspicious character' of a substance 'between two states' that suggest destruction and creation simultaneously. This understanding of the aberrant nature of honey makes the substance entirely consistent metaphorically with the scene of a buzzing hive in a dead animal, the life of Samson, and the nation-building of Israel at the time of the Judges, namely something between two states, an entity involved in self-destruction simultaneously with self-creation. […] Honey, then, provides a remarkably fine metaphor for the entire Judges story." Baker, *Hallow Men, Strange Women*, 20–21. See, also, Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; and Mbuvi, "Samson's Body Politic."

[406] Fitzgerald, "Miscellaneous Observations," 69–71.

[407] Fitzgerald, "Miscellaneous Observations," 71.

(Lev 11:24–47).[408] Near the beginning of that section, Yhwh instructs Moses and Aaron: "And anything that walks *upon its paws* (עַל־כַּפָּיו), among all living things walking upon all fours, are unclean for you, whoever touches their carcass is unclean until evening" (Lev 11:27).[409] There, not only is the distinct phrase about palms used, but the carcasses of wild animals are described as unclean, an implicit concern found also in the Samson stories after he touches the carcass of the lion, especially in its final form with the Nazirite vow.[410]

The literary artistry continues as the author chooses a rare form of the verb אכל ("to eat"), which is only used one other time in the Bible (Lev 7:24), a passage in which Yhwh is giving Moses sacrificial instructions about what should and should not be eaten (Lev 7:22–27).[411] The infinitive absolute of אכל in both passages has to do with the prohibitions of eating something from the body of a dead animal. In the book of Leviticus, it is the fat of an ox, sheep, goat, or any animal torn apart (Lev 7:22–24), while in the book of Judges, it is the honey from the lion Samson tore apart (Judg 14:9). In Yhwh's instructions to Moses, anyone who consumes such fat will be cut off from their people (Lev 7:25–27), whereas in Timnah, the honey Samson eats and shares with his parents ultimately cuts him off from his people.[412]

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[408] For more, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 691–742.

[409] For more, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 669.

[410] The phrase "upon its paws" (אל־כפיו) is only used in these two passages (Lev 11:27; Judg 14:9).

[411] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 427–29, 440–89.

[412] Thus, discovering and eating the honey is the basis for Samson's riddle (Judg 14:12), thereby initiating his skirmishes with the Philistines (Judg 14:19–15:8), his retreat into the mountains of Lehi (Judg 15:9–13), his battle with a jawbone (Judg 15:14–20), and his tragic death at the hands of his enemies in Gaza (Judg 16:21–30).

The intertextuality and wordplay continue, since in the next clause Samson offers his parents some of the forbidden honey to eat, evoking imagery and language from the garden of Eden in which the serpent offers forbidden fruit to Adam and Eve. There, it reads "and she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (ותתן גם־לאישה עמה ויאכל) (Gen 3:6), whereas in the Samson story, the text reads "and he gave to them, and they ate" (ויתן להם ויאכלו) (Judg 14:9). Furthermore, in both stories, the characters are tempted to eat something they appear to find desirable in their eyes even though it is prohibited.[413] The main characters in both texts are also drawn into a struggle in which their knowledge and wisdom are challenged and expanded through a series of language games, something common in folklore and myth.[414] In the former, it is with the serpent regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and in the latter, it is with the Philistines regarding their contest of riddles with Samson.[415] Lastly, the noun for the honey with the definite article (הדבש) at the end of the verse (Judg 14:9) is used only one other time in the Bible, when Johnathan eats the honey in the forests of Gibeah after slaying Philistines (1 Sam 14:27), even though eating anything that day was forbidden and under a curse by his father Saul (1 Sam 14:24–30).[416] As noted above, Jonathan's venture into the woods with his armor bearer follows the scene in which Jonathan, like Samson, did not tell his father about his

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[413] In Genesis, the fruit of the tree "is a delight to the eyes" (וכי תאוה־הוא לעינים) of Eve, and in Judges, the woman and presumably the honey is "right in his eyes" (ישרה בעיני), that is, the eyes of Samson.

[414] For more, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation, A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 72–76; and Mark S. Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil - The Fall(out) and Original Sin in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 49–58.

[415] Blenkinsopp compares Gen 3:1–7 with similar images and themes from other ancient Near Eastern myths, including immortality, serpents, and wisdom in the Gilgamesh epic and the story of Adapa (Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 74–75).

[416] For more, see McCarter, *I Samuel*, 250–52.

secretive exploits (1 Sam 14:1; cf. Judg 14:6, 9). The wild honey brightened Jonathan's

eyes (1 Sam 14:27, 29)—the main metaphorical organ (eyes) and sense (sight) in the

Bible—and the same effect appears to be true for Samson, who proceeds to pose his

ingenious riddle to the Philistines at his wedding after eating wild honey in the forest

(Judg 14:12).[417] Thus, having demonstrated his divinely empowered strength slaying the

lion (Judg 14:6) and his clever albeit impulsive decision to explore (Judg 14:8) and

consume (Judg 14:9) the vitalizing honey forming in its carcass, Samson and his father

descend again to Timnah and begin the celebration of Samson's marriage to the unnamed

Philistine woman/wife and her unsuspecting family (Judg 14:10).[418]

Upon arrival, the narrator says that "Samson made a feast there, for that is what

young men would normally do" (Judg 14:10). Both the LXX[A] and LXX[B] include the

comment "for seven days" (ἡμέρας ἑπτά), aligning it with the rest of the story since the

wedding celebration lasts a full week (Judg 14:12, 15, 17, 18).[419] The word used for

"feast" (משתה) is found throughout the Bible, especially in the book of Esther where

feasting is central to the story.[420] In nearly all those other occurrences, drinking is

involved, which is why some scholars argue that it is another example of Samson

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[417] McCarter, *I Samuel*, 246; and Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture – Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 545 (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 223–276.

[418] Only Samson and his father are mentioned here going down (ירד) to the woman in Timnah (Judg 14:10), which is strange, since his mother is mentioned in every other scene (Judg 14:2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 15). Some scholars argue for more intentional ambiguity between the woman/wife distinction in the text. For more, see Schneider, *Judges*, 203.

[419] Tov argues that ἡμέρας ἑπτά is a syntactical Hebraism in the LXX manuscripts. Emmanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 92–94 [esp. 94].

[420] Gen 19:3; 21:8; 26:30; 29:22; 40:20; 1 Sam 25:36; 2 Sam 3:20; 1 Kgs 3:15; Is 25:6; Jer 16:8; Job 1:4; Prov 15:15; Ecc 7:2; Esth 1:3, 5, 9; 2:18; 7:8; 8:17; 9:17, 18, 22.

breaking his Nazirite vow (cf. Num 6:3–4; Judg 13:4, 7, 14).[421] However, if Samson's

status as a Nazirite only came with the additions of Judg 16 and 13, as argued here and

elsewhere, then the drinking and feasting serve a different purpose in this version of the

story. Instead, it appears to signal Samson's willingness to embrace the customs of the

Philistines and unite the different people groups by marrying into a foreign family. For

this reason, Niditch argues that "the ritual process, like the riddling contest, would seem

to be a means of defining opposing groups while having them interact, the goal in actual

marriage events: to create a new sense of community and union. In this case, of course,

the results are the opposite."[422] Opposite results indeed, but not surprising ones.

Accordingly, David Wright has shown how feasting in the Canaanite world, seen

especially in its literary representations (e.g., Tale of Aqhat), is a place where felicitous

and infelicitous actions take place, including acts of retaliation and revenge.[423] This is

precisely what happens before and after the wedding feast in the Samson stories as

Samson is contrasted with his newly acquired Philistine companions (Judg 14:3) with

whom he proceeds to quickly engage in a deadly bout of *lex talionis* once things go awry

(Judg 14:15–15:17).[424]

The descriptive comment by the narrator "for that is what young men would

normally do" (כן יעשו הבחורים) also appears to serve more than one purpose. On the one

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[421] Soggin, *Judges*, 241; Butler, *Judges*, 336; Schneider, *Judges*, 206. For a contrasting view, see Stipp, "Simson, der Nasiräer"; Groß, *Richter*, 667–68; Lemardelé, "Samson le *nazir*"; Spronk, *Judges*, 399–402; and Bachmann, *Judges*, 169.

[422] Niditch, *Judges*, 156. See, also, Schneider, *Judges*, 205–08.

[423] David P. Wright, *Ritual in Narrative – The Dynamics of Feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2001).

[424] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24; Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 199–230; and Paynter, "'Revenge.'"

hand, it may reflect the similar cultural practices of ancient Israelites, Judahites, and/or Philistines, who most likely celebrated such events with ample libation, as seen in both the material and textual evidence (cf. Gen 29:22).[425] On the other hand, by using the imperfect tense of the verb עשה with the young men (יעשו), the author likely reveals an attempt to validate the antiquity of the story by demonstrating authentic knowledge of a habitual action practiced centuries prior to the actual composition of the text. Similarly, the narrator uses the common Deuteronomistic phrase "until this day" in the following chapter after Samson defeats the Philistines at Lehi (Judg 15:19) to explain an ancient and perhaps unexpected etiology to their audience.[426] These incomplete actions in the past therefore create ambiguity and provide distance between the text and the reader, allowing authors to establish the antiquity of their story.[427]

The next verse in Judg 14:11 is short and condensed with four verbs, three of which are Qal Imperfect like those used for the unidentified young men in the previous verse. The narrator therefore notes how that "when they saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him," implying that those "thirty companions" (שלשים מרעים) accompanying Samson are Philistines and not his own kin.[428] It is not explicitly clear, though, who the subjects of these verbs are or even what verb is being used. Hence, the

[425] Groß, *Richter*, 692; Yasur-Landau, "Old Wine in New Vessels"; Maeir, "Aegean Feasting"; Altmann and Fu, *Feasting*; and Fu, Shafer-Elliot, and Myers, *T&T Clark Handbook of Food*.

[426] For more, see Childs, "A Study of the Formula"; and Geoghegan, "'Until This Day'." For other uses of "until this day" (עד היום הזה) in the DH, see Deut 2:22; 3:14; 10:8; 34:6; Josh 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; 8:28, 29; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10; Judg 1:21, 26, 6:24; 10:4; 18:12; 1 Sam 5:5; 6:18; 27:6; 30:25; 2 Sam 4:3; 6:8; 18:18; 1 Kgs 8:8; 9:13; 9:21; 10:12; 12:19; 2 Kgs 2:22; 8:22; 10:27; 14:7; 16:6; 17:23, 34, 41.

[427] For more on imperfect inflection and past time, see Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction*, 496–504.

[428] Groß, *Richter*, 692; Niditch, *Judges*, 156; Nelson, *Judges*, 247; and Spronk, *Judges*, 418.

Greek in the LXX[A] has "when they were *afraid* of him" (ἐν τῷ φοβεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς αὐτὸν), whereas the Hebrew in the MT has "when they *saw* him" (כִּרְאוֹתָם אוֹתוֹ), leading many to conclude that the Greek translators read בְּיִרְאָתָם instead of כִּרְאוֹתָם and confused the verb ראה ("to see") with the verb ירא ("to fear").[429] The word used for the "companions" or "friends" brought to Samson (מרע) is only used seven times in the Bible, four of which are in the Samson stories (Gen 26:26; Judg 14:11, 20; 15:2, 6; 2 Sam 3:8; Prov 19:7). The noun מרע is derived from the verb רעה, meaning to "pasture, tend, graze," or from its homonym, meaning to "associate with," from which the more common word for "companion" or "friend" (רע) also derives and can be seen in other savior stories in the book of Judges (e.g., Judg 6:29; 7:13–14, 22; 10:18). The latter word for companion or friend (רע) also relates to one of the Akkadian words for "friend" or "companion" (*ruʾu*), which is often used of friends of gods, heroes, and kings.[430]

Intriguingly, the root (רעה) for this uncommon word used to describe the "companions" (מרעים) at Samson's wedding in Judg 14:11 and 14:20 is also the root for the uncommon word used to describe the "cave" or "pasture" (מרעה) of the young lions in the prophet Nahum's metaphorical taunt of the Neo-Assyrian King and the downfall of his capital city of Nineveh (Nah 2:11–13). Furthermore, Nahum's description of the "cave" or "pasture" (מרעה) of the "young lions" (כפרים) in Nah 2:11 relates to one of the more common Akkadian words for "pasture" *mirītu* (cf. *reʾûm*).[431] In other words, the Philistine companions (מרעים) brought to overlook Samson will quickly be outwitted and

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[429] Cf. Boling, Judges, 231; Butler, *Judges*, 313; Groß, *Richter*, 692; Moore, *Judges*, 336–37; Niditch, *Judges*, 152; Schneider, *Judges*, 207; Soggin, *Judges*, 241; Spronk, *Judges*, 418.

[430] Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 367–68. CAD R 439–40.

[431] Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 225. CAD M/2 107–08; CAD R 300–14.

overpowered by a Judahite who slew a young lion (כפיר) by the power of Yhwh (Judg

14:6)—not unlike the Assyrian King and overlords represented by a cave (מרעה) of

starving young lions (כפרים) who are also slain by the power of Yhwh (Nah 2:11–13).

This web of meaning-making associated with events in the seventh century BCE,

possibly reflecting Neo-Assyrian imagery and language, indicates another form of

wordplay by the authors of the Samson stories. It is this type of activity by these biblical

scribes displaying the mastery of their native tongue that exhibits religious and social

power in trying imperial contexts, what Peter Bedford calls "narratives of resistance."[432]

This form of resistance is nowhere on greater display in the Samson stories than in the

following scene in which Samson challenges his foreign companions to a contest of

language games by way of a perplexing חידה.

In Judg 14:12, Samson speaks to the Philistines for the first time in the story,

saying "Let me, pray, riddle (חוד) to you a riddle (חידה)."[433] The noun in the Samson

stories almost always translated in English as "riddle" (חידה) does not look like a typical

riddle, at least not in its most common usage, that is, as a clever question and answer in

the form of a verbal image.[434] Instead, Samson's riddle is seemingly unanswerable to the

Philistines. Rather than an enigmatic inquiry and entertaining response, Samson's riddle

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[432] Peter R. Bedford, "Assyria's Demise as Recompense: A Note on Narratives of Resistance in Babylonia and Judah," in *Revolt and Resistance in the Ancient Classical World and the Near East – In the Crucible of Empire*, ed. John J. Collins and J. G. Manning (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 55–75.

[433] As a cognitive accusative, which is an emphasis or expression of the verb's action, this part of the verse is usually translated as "Let me pose/put to/tell you a riddle." However, considering the wordplay used throughout the story and the rhetorical effect of such phrasing, a literal translation of אחודה-נא לכם חידה ("riddle to you a riddle") is used here. For more, see Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical*, 167.

[434] For an analysis of the most common forms of riddles, see Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles – Perspectives on the Use, Function and Change in a Folklore Genre*, Studia Fennica Folkloristica 10 (Helinski: Finnish Literature Society, 2001), 38–53.

is a personal experience known only to him and the hearers and readers of the story,

which is the miraculous encounter between Samson and a lion, and his subsequent

discovery of honey inside of its dead body (Judg 14:5–9). The sequence of the riddle is

even reversed since the question is given in the form of an answer (Judg 14:12) and the

answer in the form of a question (Judg 14:18). Moreover, Samson's riddle has multiple

possible solutions other than those provided in the text, thereby causing a conundrum for

scholars.[435] Yet, as Claudia Camp notes: "If riddles presuppose solutions, trickster tales

do not!"[436] And the Samson stories are excellent trickster tales, filled with such tales and

textual ambiguities.[437] Hence, Gunkel identified two originally separate folkloric riddles

in Judg 14:14 and 18 that were seemingly brought together in the *Sitz im Leben* of the

wedding feast.[438] Similarly, Crenshaw argues that the final form of the story grew out of

three initially separate riddles, of which the central one was a "Neck Riddle" with erotic

and obscene overtones (e.g., semen and vomit) requiring an answer upon penalty of

death.[439] Conversely, Mieke Bal argues that Samson's riddle is a powerful speech-act

with multiple levels of meaning, however ambiguous, that brings it into close alignment

with Jephthah's vow, especially since both end in the violent death of an innocent woman

(cf. Judg 11:29–40; 14:15; 15:6).[440] Even in their finals forms, the Samson stories are

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[435] Jeremy Schipper, "Narrative Obscurity of Samson's חידה in Judg 14.14 and 18," *JSOT* 27 (2003): 339–53.

[436] Camp, "Riddlers," 98.

[437] Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero"; Camp, "Riddlers"; and Exum, "Many Faces."

[438] Gunkel, "Simpson," 52–54.

[439] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 111–120 [esp. 113].

[440] Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 135–47.

often interpreted under the guise of a riddle.[441] These and other readings of the text often revolve around different understandings of the form and function of the חידה in the Bible in general and the Samson stories in particular.[442] Elsewhere, the folklorist, Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, argues how "[r]iddles clearly say something about the material culture of the community in which they are used" and "it is difficult and futile to detach them from the material and research context to which they apply."[443] What, then, were the contexts within which the חידות formed and functioned?

The word חידה is only used seventeen times in the Bible (Num 12:8; Judg 14:12–19; 1 Kgs 10:1; 2 Chr 9:1; Ps 49:4; 78:2; Prov 1:6; Ezek 17:2; Dan 8:23; Hab 2:6), eight of which are in the Samson stories.[444] The range of meaning in the English translations of חידה throughout the Bible (e.g., "dark saying," "dream," "enigma," "intrigue," "riddle," and "subversive speech") can also be found among the earliest Greek translators. These different meanings, for example, include the words αἴνιγμα (Num 12:8; 1 Kgs 10:1; 2

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[441] Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; Camp, "Riddlers"; Mira Morgenstern, "Samson and the Politics of Riddling," *Hebrew Political Studies* 1 (2006): 253–85; Baker, *Hollow Men*; and Jack M. Sasson, "Samson as Riddle," in *Essays in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Edward L. Greenstein*, ed. Peter Machinist et al., WAWSup 5 and 6 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 579–93.

[442] Otto Eissfeldt, "Die Rätsel in Jud 14," *ZAW* 30 (1910): 132–35; Gunkel, "Simpson," 52–54; J. R. Porter, "Samson's Riddle: Judges XIV. 14, 18," *JTS* 13 (1962): 106–09; Hans-Peter Müller, "Der Begriff „Rätsel" im Altern Testament" *VT* 20 (1970): 465–489; Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; P. Nel, "The Riddle of Samson (Judg 14, 14.18)," *Bib* (1985): 534–45; Margalith, "Samson's Riddles"; Camp, "Riddlers"; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 207–27; Yadin, "Samson's *ḥîdâ*"; Schipper, "Narrative Obscurity"; Erik Eynikel, "The Riddle of Samson: Judges 14," pages 45–54 in *Stimulation from Leiden: Collected Communications to the XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Peter Lang, 2004); Bertram Herr, "Das Geheimnis des Rätsels: Rätsel als biblisch-theologische Grösse (inklusive eines Forschungsberichts zu Ri 14,14.18)," pages 165–78 in *Ein Herz so weit wie der Sand am Ufer des Meeres: Festschrift für Georg Hentschel*, ed. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, Annett Giercke, and Christina Nießen, Erfurter theologische Studien 90 (Würzburg: Echter 2006); Groß, *Richter*, 693–99; Morgenstern, "Samson and the Politics"; and Sasson, "Samson as Riddle."

[443] Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 10, 53.

[444] For more, see V. Hamp, "חִידָה *chîdhāh*," *TDOT* IV:320–23.

Chr 9:1; Prov 1:6; Dan 8:23), διήγημα (Ezek 17:2), and πρόβλημα (Judg 14:12–19; Ps

49:4 [LXX Ps 48:5]; 78:2 [LXX 77:2]; Hab 2:6). Furthermore, the word חידה is often

paired with the word משל in these texts (Ps 49:4; 78:2; Prov 1:6; Ezek 17:2; Hab 2:6),

which itself also has a range of meaning in its English translations (e.g., "parable,"

"proverb," "saying," and "simile") but only different inflections of the word παραβολή in

its Greek translations.

As noted above, the tendency found among the Greek manuscripts is a literal

translation of the Hebrew *Vorlage*(*n*) of the book of Judges.[445] For that reason, the

ancient witness of the Greek translators' consistent use of πρόβλημα in the Samson

stories for חידה should inform its modern interpretation, that is, not as a riddle (αἴνιγμα)

but rather as a contest or problem to be solved (πρόβλημα).[446] In other words, rather than

having Samson initially say to the Philistines "Let me, pray, (חוד) riddle to you a riddle

(חידה)" it should initially say "Let me, pray, challenge (חוד) to you a contest (חידה)" (Judg

14:12).[447] The translation of חידה as a "contest" here is better suited to the narrative

context of the wedding feast in which Samson begins his struggle with the Philistines

and, like the Greek translators, distinguishes the use of חידה in other parts of the Bible.

Understanding חידה as a contest in the Samson stories not only corresponds with the

immediate narrative context of the wedding feast (Judg 14:12–19) but also with the

proceeding context (Judg 15:1–19) where Samson engages in a bout of brains and brawn

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[445] Fernández Marcos, "Joshua and Judges"; and idem, "Septuagint Reading."

[446] For similar understandings of the חידה in the Samson stories as a contest of competing people groups, see Niditch, *Judges*, 156–57; Bachmann, *Judges*, 169–73; and Spronk, *Judges*, 418–19.

[447] Thus, the MT reads "אָחוּדָה־נָּא לָכֶם חִידָה" (Judg 14:12) and the LXX^A reads "προβαλῶ ὑμῖν πρόβλημα" (Judg 14:12) and LXX^B reads "πρόβλημα ὑμῖν προβάλλομαι" (Judg 14:12).

with the Philistines. It is perhaps for these reasons that when interpreting the Samson stories alongside the wisdom tradition Mercedes Bachmann observes how "a riddle is a contest or evaluation of the other's knowledge and skill and an occasion for boasting."[448] Indeed, throughout this long series of retaliation and revenge, Samson outdoes the Philistines at every turn, thereby creating an imbalanced form of *lex talionis* for the hero of the story (cf. Deut 19:21).[449] The text also functions as cultural and narrative resistance by the biblical scribes attempting to outwit their Neo-Assyrian overlords by using cryptic language in the form of חידות to speak truth to power.[450]

The second half of the verse also supports this reading. Samson establishes the stakes of the challenge and its wager with the Philistines by saying "if told, you must disclose it to me [within] seven days of the feast, then I will give to you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing" (Judg 14:12). The seven days, of course, reflect the length of the wedding feast (Judg 14:17) and the amount of time Samson gives to the Philistines to find (מצא) the answer to his חידה and win the contest. There are two notable verbs in this part of the verse. The first one is נגד ("to be conspicuous," or "to tell"), which is used many times throughout the Samson stories (Judg 13:6, 10; 14:2, 9, 12–17, 19; 16:6, 10, 13, 15, 17–18) and adds to the ongoing theme of knowing and not knowing in the text (cf. Gen 31:20; Josh 2:14, 20; Judg 13:6; 16:6, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18).[451] As shown

[448] Bachmann, *Judges*, 170.

[449] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24; Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 199–230; and Paynter, "'Revenge.'"

[450] Bedford, "Assyria's Demise"; and Boyd, *Language Contact*. Tawil, for example, drawing upon Held, argues that the Akkadian substantive *ḫittu* ("utterance") and the verb *ḫâdu* ("to make an utterance") are cognates to חידה and supported by its usage in the Bible and therefore better understood as a "riddle" (חידה) and "to make a riddle" (חוד). Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 104–5.

above, the narrator uses the perfect aspect of the verb נגד for prominent leaders in the DH, namely Saul (1 Sam 10:15–16), Jonathan (1 Sam 14:1), David (2 Sam 15:31), and Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1), all of whom also conceal valuable information from their counterparts like Samson. The Hiphil form of the verb is used twice here in construct to express necessity: "if told, *you must disclose* it to me" (אם־הגד תגידו אותה לי). The second verb מצא ("to attain" or "to find") is only used three times in the Samson stories, two of which while discussing the חידה (Judg 14:12, 18) and one when Samson discovers the jawbone at Lehi and uses it to pummel the Philistines (Judg 15:15). Given the nature of the חידה to both challenge and evaluate the intelligence of the Philistines, the Qal Perfect form of the verb מצא emphasizes the pressure on the wedding companions "to achieve" the correct response to Samson's חידה rather than simply happen upon it, that is, it must be the result of an intentional search for knowledge and wisdom (cf. Prov 3:13).[452] Furthermore, the rewards could hardly be higher since Samson bets the Philistine companions "thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes," a wager reflecting both his supreme confidence and naïve foolishness. As Alter sardonically concludes: "Samson takes on himself an indemnity in the bet thirty times that of each of the Philistine men."[453]

Nevertheless, the sartorial prizes presented by Samson are not as straightforward as they initially appear in the story. The amount of "linen garments" (סדינים) and

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[451] There are 138 times that the verb נגד is used in the Hiphil throughout the DH. Of those 138 occurrences, 27 are in the book of Judges, of which 23 are in the Samson stories alone. For more, see F. Garcia-López, "נגד *ngd*," *TDOT* IX:174–86.

[452] S. Wagner, "מָצָא *māṣāʾ*," *TDOT* VIII:465–83 [esp. 467–68].

[453] Robert Alter, *The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 181.

"changes of clothes" (חלפת בגדים) match the number of Philistine companions challenged, however, the number itself has folkloric value since it corresponds to the other explicit intervals of three permeating the Samson stories.[454] For example, there are not only thirty wedding companions (Judg 14:11) and thirty garments and changes of clothing wagered (Judg 14:12–13), but thirty Philistines slew by Samson at Ashkelon and thirty suits of armor (חליצה) taken from their corpses (Judg 14:19); there are also three-hundred foxes released by Samson in the fields of the Philistines (Judg 15:4–5); three-thousand men of Judah who visit Samson at the Rock of Etam (Judg 15:11); three lies told by Samson to Delilah about the source of his strength (Judg 16:15); and three-thousand Philistines crushed after Samson destroys the temple of Dagon (Judg 16:17). There are also implicit intervals of three across the Samson stories, including three occasions when the "spirit of Yhwh" descends upon Samson (14:6, 19; 15:14); three different women from three separate places with whom Samson is intimately involved, namely Timnah (Judg 14–15:6), Gaza (Judg 16:1–3), and the Sorek Valley (Judg 16:4–20); and eventually a large, three-part, structure of the Samson stories in their final form (Judg 13; 14–15; 16).[455] Even the type of clothing wagered is not entirely certain, which Samson complicates further by returning thirty suits of armor (חליצה) from the dead Philistines he slays in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19; cf. 2 Samuel 2:21).[456] The Greek translators attempt to resolve

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[454] Alter, "Samson without Folklore."

[455] Exum, "Symmetry and Balance."

[456] Regarding the "change of clothing" (חלפת בגדים) wagered by Samson, Mobley notes how חלפת in construct with בגדים is used eight times in the Bible (Gen 45:22; Judg 14:12, 13, 19; 2 Kgs 5:5, 22, 23), and each time the clothing "are royal gifts given with other luxuries" and serve as "special garments of celebration suitable for a wedding banquet, as in the story in Judg 14." Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal*, 47 [n. 36]. On the other hand, the term חליצה is only used twice in the Bible (Judg 14:19; 2 Sam 2:21) and is commonly translated as "clothes" or "garments." However, "armor" seems the most fitting translation in

this issue in the following verse (Judg 14:13) by noting that the "linen garments" (σινδόνας) and "robes" (στολὰς) in the LXX[A] and "linen garments" (σινδόνας) and "alternate robes" (ἀλλασσομένας στολὰς) in the LXX[B] are both "used as outer garments" (ἱματίων).

The authors use the word חליפה ("a change") three times in the story (Judg 14:12, 13, 19) and the word מחלפה ("a braid or plait of hair") twice in the Samson and Delilah story (Judg 16:13, 19), both of which are derived from the verb חלף ("to pass away, on, or through").[457] The root ḥlp is common in all Semitic languages, and its verbal cognates can be found in Akkadian ḫalāpu ("to slip away"), Aramaic ḥălaf ("to pass away, change"), and Arabic ḥalafa ("to be the next in line, successor").[458] The literal and figurative use of חלף in the Bible includes divine (e.g., Isa 2:18; Job 20:24; Ps 90:5–6) and human (e.g., Judg 5:26; Isa 8:8; 21:1; Hab 11:1) violence.[459] The Kenite hero Jael, for example, smashes the head (ראש) of the Canaanite general Sisera with her peg and hammer, and pierces (חלפה) his temples (Judg 5:26; cf. Judg 4:21). However, while all commentators focus on the violence of this final act by Jael against Sisera, few, if any,

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the Samson stories, since the only other use of חליצה is in a military context in which Abner pleads with Asahel to take the חליצה from one of the fallen warriors after the battle at Gibeon (2 Sam 2:12–32). Alter infers a clever use of wordplay here by the biblical author who demonstrates how Samson upholds his end of the bargain (Judg 14:12–13) while also giving the Philistines their comeuppance for cheating him (Judg 14:15, 18). Alter, *Former Prophets*, 183.

[457] Sven Tengström, "חָלַף *chālaph*; חֲלִיפָה *chᵃlîphāh*; חֵלֶף *chēleph*; מַחְלָפוֹת *machlᵉphôth*," *TDOT* IV:432–35. CAD H 35–36. Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 108.

[458] Tengström, "חָלַף *chālaph*," 432–33.

[459] Tengström, "חָלַף *chālaph*," 435. For a comparison of the use of *ḥlp* in First Isaiah and Akkadian texts, see Ronnie Goldstein, "From Gods to Idols—Changes in Attitude Towards Other Gods in Biblical Literature and the Revision of Isaiah 2:18–21," in *On the Border Line: Textual Meets Literary Criticism. Proceedings of a Conference in Honor of Alexander Rofé on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* [Hebrew], ed. Zipora Talshir and Dalia Amara (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion Universeity of the Negev Press, 2005); and Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39 - Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, ANEM 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 275–314 [esp. 296].

consider how the other meanings of ראש and חלף may function in this epic narrative and poem (Judg 4–5), which is the political exchange of one people (Canaanites) for another (Israelites).[460] Thus, the figurative use of חלף can be political as well as violent. The authors of First Isaiah, for example, symbolically describe how the riches of Israel will pass away (חלף) from the great flood of the Assyrian army (Isa 8:8) while Judah will ultimately remain protected (Isa 8:9–10).[461] Moreover, the eventual destruction and exile of Israel by this foreign invasion is described as a replacement (חלף) of their paltry bricks and sycamore trees with the illustrious dressed stones and cedars of the Neo-Assyrian empire (Isa 9:10).[462] Likewise, ראש literally and anatomically means "head," but it also has many figurative meanings, including architectural (pinnacle or roof), geographical (peak or ridge), political (leader of a governing or military body), and temporal (beginning of a period, reign, or religious activity) meanings—as does its Akkadian cognate *rēšû*.[463] Furthermore, the word ראש is often used in the contexts of war and violence, especially in the DH, whether in a general sense (e.g., Deut 32:42; 33:5, 21; Judg 5:26; 7:25; 9:53; 1 Sam 17:46, 51, 54, 57; 29:4; 31:9; 2 Sam 2:16; 4:7–8, 12; 16:9; 20:21–22; 2 Kgs 6:31–32; 10:6–8), or when identifying specific military (e.g., 2 Sam

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[460] The scholarship on Judg 4–5 is extensive. See the critical commentary and secondary works cited in Moore, *Judges*, 163–64; Burney, *Book of Judges*, 152–54; Boling, *Judges*, 114–15; Niditch, *Judges*, 81; Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 307; Spronk, *Judges*, 175–76; and Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges I*, 352–54.

[461] The LXX reads the beginning of Isa 8:8 as follows: "and he will take away from Judea any man who can lift his head or who is capable to accomplish anything" (καὶ ἀφελεῖ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἄνθρωπον ὃς δυνήσεται κεφαλὴν ἆραι ἢ δυνατὸν συντελέσασθαί τι).

[462] J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 132–35.

[463] Ulrich Dahmen, "ראֹשׁ *rō'š*; רִאשָׁה *ri'šâ*; רֹאשָׁה *rō'šâ*; מְרַאֲשׁוֹת *mᵉra ᵃšôṯ*," *TDOT* XIII:248–61. CAD R 277–97. Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 351–53.

23:8, 13, 18), tribal (e.g., Deut 1:13, 15; 5:23; 29:10; Josh 22:21, 30; Judg 10:18; 11:8–11), and royal (1 Sam 15:17; 2 Sam 22:44) leaders.[464]

Even the word בגדים ("clothing") may be used as a type of polysemy by the authors since the word also means "treacherous ones" (Isa 24:16; Jer 12:1). Thus, while Samson wagers "thirty changes of clothes" (ושלשים חלפת בגדים) and then loses the bet, what he pays back is "thirty treacherous replacements" (ושלשים חלפת בגדים), that is, dead Philistines (Judg 14:19). In one short verse, then, it appears that the authors of the Samson stories foreshadow the destruction of the Philistines in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19), Timnah (Judg 15:8), and Gaza (Judg 16:30), as well as their eventual replacement by the Israelites under the leadership of Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 7:7–15). Hence, through their double meaning, ראש and חלף serve as another example of polysemy by the authors of the Samson stories as their hero changes the political leadership over the land from Philistine to Israelite (Judg 14:4).

Judges 14:12 should read as follows then: "Let me, pray, challenge you to a contest; if told, you must disclose it to me within seven days of the feast, and [if] you achieve [it], then I will give to you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes." Of course, like most contests and wagers, the one who loses must pay the price, and this is precisely what Samson guarantees in the following verse. Hence, if the Philistines are unable to disclose the answer to Samson's language game, then all thirty of the changes of clothes and linen garments will go to this Judahite outsider from north of Timnah.[465] The Philistines duly comply, saying in response to Samson: "challenge your contest, and

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[464] Dahmen, "ראֹשׁ rōʾš," 252–56.

[465] Cf. Heb. סָדִין and Akk. s/šaddinnu. Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 257.

we will hear it!" (Judg 14:13). To invoke Paul Ricœur, the language used here by the biblical authors is indicative of *the world inside the text*, that is, as a struggle between Samson and the Philistines, and it is indicative of *the world behind the text*, that is, as a struggle between the Judahites and their Neo-Assyrian overlords.[466]

As the story continues to unfold, the struggle of the worlds behind and inside the Samson stories intersect and converge into one of increasing resistance.[467] This confluence of realities is perhaps seen in a verbal link between two different streams of biblical and Mesopotamian texts. Accordingly, twice in the book of Psalms the verb פתח ("to open") is used to reveal divine or hidden knowledge (Ps 49:4, 78:2), particularly the type of knowledge contained in a חידה or a משל.[468] The verb פתה ("to be spacious, wide, open"), which is a near-homonym of פתח, sharing a very similar look and sound, and overlapping in meaning, is used twice when Samson is pressured to be enticed (פתה) to reveal his safely guarded secrets.[469] Thus, Samson is pressed (צוק) by his Philistine bride to reveal the answer to his חידה (Judg 14:17) and later pressed (צוק) again by Delilah to reveal the source of his strength (Judg 16:16). In both instances, it is the Philistines who coerce the women into drawing out Samson's secrets, whether through violence (Judg 14:15) or bribery (Judg 16:5). The verbs פתח and פתה derive from different roots, but פתח shares the same root as the Akkadian verb *petû* ("to open"), which is also used when divine knowledge (Akk. *pirištu*) is revealed to heroic figures in the Gilgamesh Epic, such

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[466] Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87–94.

[467] Boyd, *Language Contact*, 371–410.

[468] Rüdiger Bartelmus, "פָתַח *pātaḥ*; et al.," *TDOT* XII:173–91.

[469] R. Mosis, "פָתָה *pth*; et al.," *TDOT* XII:162–72.

as from Utnapishtim to Gilgamesh (Gilg. XI 10, 282) and from Ea to Atrahasis (Gilg. XI

196).[470] The verb *petû* is also used when Shamhat sexually entices the wild man Enkidu

(Gilg. I 181) similarly to how פתה is used when the Timnah woman and Delilah entice

Samson to reveal himself to them (Judg 14:17; 16:16).[471]

According to the psalmists in the Bible, secret knowledge is revealed (פתח) by

Yhwh to all people (Ps 49:1) or to all Israel (Ps 78:1), rather than to a single figure, such

as to Gilgamesh or Atrahasis in the Gilgamesh Epic. Yet, unlike the Psalms, this is not

the case in the Samson stories, since secret knowledge is held by a single figure: Samson

(Judg 14:6, 9, 16). Therefore, the use of the verb *petû* for revealing divine or hidden

knowledge to heroic figures in the Gilgamesh Epic (Gilg. XI 10, 196, 282) and the use of

the verb פתה to entice Samson to do the same (Judg 14:17; 16:16) provides a noteworthy

point of intersection. Furthermore, the use of the verb פתח in the book of Psalms to reveal

the divine meaning of a חידה, either through the lyre (Ps 49:4) or the mouth (Ps 78:2) of

Yhwh, reflects the way in which such divine knowledge is also revealed to Atrahasis

(Gilg. XI 196) and Gilgamesh (Gilg. XI 10, 282).[472] However, what is the likelihood of a

biblical scribe being familiar with the Gilgamesh Epic, particularly one who presumably

had little or no knowledge of cuneiform? According to Marc van de Mieroop, the

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[470] See CAD P 338–58, 398–401; Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 308–09; and Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic – Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), 548–49, 702–03, 716–17, 720–21.

[471] Thus, Shamhat is instructed to entice the wild man Enkidu away from the herd through her sexual wiles: "bare your sex so he may take in your charms!" (*ur-ki pi-te-ma ku-zu-ub-ki lil-qé*) (Gilg. I 181). For more on themes underlying the uncultured male hero and his sexual encounters with a cultured woman in these texts, see Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal*, 85–108; and Tzvi Abusch, *Male and Female in the Epic of Gilgamesh – Encounter, Literary History, and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 144–65.

[472] Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 309.

Gilgamesh Epic was so widespread and known across the ancient Near East that its

literary characters and themes were known even to those without the ability to read

Akkadian or even Aramaic. Thus, he notes the following:

> Gilgameš was a central character in the literary imagination of the ancient
> Near East. Stories about him certainly circulated in writing in the early
> second millennium ascribing a remarkable array of adventures and
> accomplishments to him. After an Akkadian-writing author at that time
> molded them into a whole that we now call the *Babylonian Epic of
> Gilgameš*, discarding some earlier ideas but also enriching the character
> with new aspects, the text was copied and elaborated by numerous ancient
> Near Eastern authors over many centuries. Manuscripts with sometimes
> variants continue to appear. This was not the preserve of Babylonians;
> authors from Anatolia, Syria, and the Levant engaged with the epic,
> modified it, excerpted it, and translated it. And once cuneiform was no
> longer the dominant script, people referred to elements of it in a variety of
> languages. They did not translate passages, but reformulated them to fit
> new contexts and ideologies or simply mentioned characters from the epic.
> *Gilgameš* started out as a truly cosmopolitan text, shared by all those who
> knew cuneiform. Every author contributed in shaping this text, which was
> alive and never finished, and as a study of the evolution of the epic now
> decades old pointed out, each of these versions should be 'taken seriously
> as a piece of literature in its own right.' But it was also a text that was so
> famous in the ancient Near East that writers who did not use cuneiform
> knew about elements of it and reacted to it.[473]

Of course, in all three texts hearers and readers are privy to the same information

as that expressed by the characters inside of them, thereby providing a seemingly divine

perspective within those literary worlds.[474] In other words, as Baker argues elsewhere:

"While Samson's riddle appears on the surface an example of contest literature, its role

within the book as a whole is more profound" especially because "the riddles which rely

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[473] Van de Mieroop, *Before and After Babel*, 4.

[474] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative – Ideological Literature and the Drama of
Reading*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 153–85; and Hayden White, *The Content of
the Form – Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press,
1987), 1–25, 169–84.

on the layering of meaning […] explicitly invite vertical reading."[475] If so, then what

layers of meaning are contained inside and behind the worlds of Samson's חידה and how

might they relate to each other?

Samson's חידה is only six words or seventeen syllables long.[476] Nonetheless,

within that compacted contest of language is a variety of possible answers, meanings, and

readings, many, if not most, of which have been examined in the text's critical reception

history.[477] The passage within the Greek manuscripts contains some linguistic differences

including the addition of a pronoun (τί) in the LXX[B] that frames the πρόβλημα (חידה) as

an explicit question.[478] Such clarifications by the Greek translators is common.[479] To

maintain the rhythm of the Hebrew, the translation here uses the same amount and order

of the syllables. Hence, in response to the Philistine companions' call to "challenge your

contest, and we will hear it!" (Judg 14:13), Samson says to them: "From the eater, came

out food to eat, from the strong, came out something sweet" (מהאכל יצא מאכל ומעז יצא מתוק)

(Judg 14:14).

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[475] Baker, *Hollow Men*, 34–35.

[476] For a structural analysis of the riddle, see Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 246–52.

[477] See, for example, Eissfeldt, "Rätsel"; Gunkel, "Simpson," 52–54; Porter, "Samson's Riddle"; Crenshaw, *Samson*, 99–120; Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; Nel, "Riddle of Samson"; Margalith, "Samson's Riddles"; Camp, "Riddlers"; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 207–27; Yadin, "Samson's *ḥîdâ*"; Schipper, "Narrative Obscurity"; Eynikel, "Riddle of Samson"; Herr, "Das Geheimnis des Rätsels"; and Groß, *Richter*, 693–99.

[478] Thus, in the LXX[A] we find: "Out of the eater came forth food, and out of a strong one came forth something sweet" (Ἐκ τοῦ ἔσθοντος ἐξῆλθεν βρῶσις, καὶ ἐξ ἰσχυροῦ ἐξῆλθεν γλυκύ). Whereas, in the LXX[B] we find: "What edible thing came out of the eater and from the strong a sweet thing?" (Τί βρωτὸν ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ βιβρώσκοντος καὶ ἀπὸ ἰσχυροῦ γλυκύ).

[479] Fernández Marcos, "Septuagint Reading," 91.

Despite the playful alliteration of Samson's use of *mem* (מ) at the beginning of the first and last words in each clause—a type of paronomasia called *homoeopropheron*—the Philistines are stumped by his enigmatic חידה and unable to disclose its meaning for at least three days (Judg 14:14).[480] At this point in the contest, Samson appears to have the upper hand against his Philistine companions. However, this will not last long, as those Philistines quickly embody the common role of enemies in folklore, which are those portrayed as dangerous and dishonest, even if they are considered culturally superior.[481] Regarding cultural superiority, Wellhausen interpreted Samson as caught between two inner-conflicting souls, of which the former was a "strange man of God" who emerged out of an older, more profane history than its later, more pious one.[482] Conversely, Gunkel argued that the fundamental themes throughout the Samson stories are always the opposition between nature and culture, in which Samson represents the Israelite "natural man" over against the Philistine "cultural men."[483] Whether an older, internal conflict or a consistent, external one, it is the opposition between Samson and the Philistines inside the text, and the one between Judah and Neo-Assyria behind it, which is providing the oldest evolving layers of meaning for its compositional and reception history.

Thus, on the *seventh* day, as according to the Hebrew, or on the *fourth* day, as according to the Greek, the Philistines secretly demand the Timnite woman "seduce"

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[480] Noegel defines *homoeopropheron* as the repetition of the initial sound of words. For more, see Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient*, 241–48.

[481] Gunkel, "Simpson"; Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero"; and Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*.

[482] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 245.

[483] Gunkel, "Simpson," 39–44.

Samson (cf. Judg 16:5), as the Piel imperfect of פתה suggests, and disclose the meaning

of his חידה lest they burn her and her entire family (lit. "household of your father") in fire

(Judg 14:15; cf. 15:6).[484] Furthermore, these wedding companions angrily ask their

fellow Philistine a rhetorical question: "Did you summon us here to impoverish us?"

(הלירשנו קראתם לנו הל[ם]) (Judg 14:15).[485] As shown below, there are multiple examples of

wordplay in this verse that go in tandem with the ongoing language games entangling

Samson and the Philistines.

First, as noted above, פתה is used twice to get Samson to disclose his closely

guarded secrets to a woman with whom he is intimate (Judg 14:15; 16:5), such as

revealing the encounter with the lion and wild honey to his Philistine bride (Judg 14:17)

and his lifelong Nazirite vow to Delilah (Judg 16:17). Although Samson is the one who

discloses these secrets, rather than a god or godlike person, such as in the Gilgamesh Epic

(Gilg. XI 10, 196, 282) or the book of Psalms (Ps 49:4, 78:2), they ultimately derive from

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[484] In Judg 14:15, both the LXX^A and LXX^B read "on the fourth day" (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τετάρτῃ); whereas the MT reads "on the seventh day" (ביום השביעי). On the one hand, it seems odd for the Philistines to wait seven days before coercing Samson's bride into obtaining the meaning of his חידה since it would hardly give her enough time to do so, it is also incoherent with the previous verse in which the Philistines cannot figure out the meaning of the חידה for three days (Judg 14:14), and it conflicts with the verse in which Samson's bride presses him for seven days before he discloses the meaning of the חידה (Judg 14:17). Spronk argues that the story may have been told from two perspectives, especially since that technique is used elsewhere in the book of Judges (Judg 1–2; 4–5) and because of the symbolic use of the numbers three and seven (Judg 14:12, 15, 17–18), which have an interesting parallel with the Delilah story (cf. 16:7–8, 14–15, 19). The first perspective would be from that of the Philistine companions (Judg 14:12–15) while the second from that of Samson's bride (Judg 14:17–18). However, if this was, in fact, a story told from two perspectives, why were they spliced together here and not elsewhere in the book of Judges? Furthermore, where are the other parts of the story spliced together? For more, see Spronk, *Judges*, 420–22. Perhaps the simplest solution (*lex parsimoniae*) is the one offered as far back as Rashi, who proposed that the seven days of weeping by Samson's bride (Judg 14:17) refers to the remainder of the seven days of the feast (Judg 14:12) following the first three days in which the Philistines could not figure out the חידה (Judg 14:14).

[485] Following BHS, the end of Judg 14:15 probably was הלם ("here") rather than הלא ("not"), which is supported by other manuscripts and not an unusual construction. See Moore, *Judges*, 337; Simpson, *Composition*, 58; Boling, *Judges*, 231; Bartusch, *Understand Dan*, 145–46; Butler, *Judges*, 313–14; Nelson, *Judges*, 244.

the God or Gods of Israel, since it is the spirit of Yhwh who enables Samson to slay the

lion (Judg 14:6) and his Nazirite vow to Elohim that is the source of his strength (Judg

16:17).[486] The Piel form of פתה is used similarly for other women in the Bible, often with

sexual connotations and innuendos. For example, Yhwh "entices" a metaphorical Israel

into the desert (Hos 2:14) following a barrage of disparaging criticisms and punishments

against her (Hos 2:1–13), likely intended to be obscene and shocking to the audience of

the prophet.[487] The Piel form of פתה is also used when a woman is being "seduced" by a

man (Exod 22:16) and vice versa (Prov 1:10; 16:29) or when a person is being

"deceived" by the lips of another (Prov 24:28). These insinuations with פתה can even be

seen in the subversion of Jeremiah's masculinity when the prophet declares how Yhwh

"seduced me, and I was seduced; you raped me, and you have prevailed" (Jer 20:7; cf.

Judg 19:25; 2 Sam 13:14)—a response to his severe mistreatment by the chief priest in

the house of Yhwh (Jer 20:1–2).[488] In other words, the Philistines are not only attempting

to coerce an answer out of Samson through his unnamed wife, but likely trying to

emasculate him in the process by challenging his intelligence and using his desire for

foreign women as an apparent weakness.[489]

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[486] Smith, "Retrospective Deities in Judges."

[487] Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, OBT (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 49–52; Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 206–68 [esp. 245–60]; and Christl M. Maier, "Feminist Interpretation of the Prophets," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 467–82 [esp. 470–74].

[488] Susanna Asikainen, "The Masculinity of Jeremiah," *BibInt* 28 (2020): 34–55 [50–51].

[489] Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, "Samson: Masculinity Lost," 174–77.

The second use of wordplay comes when the Philistines threaten the Timnite woman and her family with immolation, declaring forebodingly that "we will burn you and your father's house in fire" (Judg 14:15). The theme of fire is once again front and center in the Samson stories (cf. Judg 13:20; 15:4–6, 14; 16:9), functioning as a literary through line for each compositional layer (Judg 13, 14–15, 16). The use of the verb שרף ("to burn") to describe burning people and buildings together "with fire" (באש) (Judg 14:15) is found throughout the DH (Deut 13:16; Josh 6:24; 11:11; 1 Sam 30:1, 3, 14; 2 Sam 23:7; 1 Kgs 9:16; 16:18; 2 Kgs 25:9), especially in the book of Judges, such as when Abimelech burns down the temple of El-of-Berith (Judg 9:46) with hundreds of men and women inside (Judg 9:49) and when he attempts to do the same for the "acropolis" or "tower" (מגדל) of Shechem (Judg 9:52).[490] The identical form of the verb is used when the men of Ephraim threaten to burn down the house of Jephthah because he failed to summon them to battle the Ammonites (Judg 12:1). The phrase can also be found when the tribe of Dan migrate north, kill the people of Laish, and burn them and their city with fire (Judg 18:27). The verb שרף derives from the same root as the Akkadian verb *šarāpu* ("to light a fire, to burn, to burn down"), which is also used when describing the intentional destruction of buildings and people with fire.[491]

The third use of wordplay is a type of polysemy that comes at the end of the verse when the Philistines ask their kinswoman: "Did you summon us here to impoverish us?"

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[490] Smith and Bloch-Smith note the following: "The term *migdāl* is used for a 'raised platform' (Neh 8:4), a 'raised bed (of garden), bank' (Song 5:13), and 'heap, pile' (Isa 33:18). These meanings suggest the possibility that the noun may refer to an acropolis or raised platform within a city. Such platforms or podia are well attested, for instance, at Bronze and Iron Age Shechem and Iron Age to Persian-period Lachish." Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 658–665 [658].

[491] CAD Š/2 50–53 [esp. 51–52]. Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 381.

(Judg 14:15). The Qal form of the verb ירש is used extensively throughout the DH, especially in the book of Deuteronomy when addressing the possession of the land of Canaan.[492] The word generally means "to possess," "to dispossess," or "to drive out," which is why it is prominent in the book of Deuteronomy, since Moses often describes how and why Israel will remove the Canaanites and possess the land promised to them by Yhwh (e.g., Deut 1:8, 21, 39; 3:18, 20; 4:1, 5, 14, 21, 26, 38). Thus, it is also used at the beginning of the book of Judges when the narrator describes how the Judahites drive out the Canaanites (Judg 1:19, 20) while the other tribes of Israel do not (Judg 1:21, 27–33). It is ironic that ירש is used here by the very people the Israelites were meant to drive out of the promised land.[493] The Hiphil form of the verb ירש can mean to "impoverish" (e.g., 1 Sam 2:7; Zec 9:4; Job 20:15) and/or "destroy" (e.g., Exod 15:9) enemies, which is how ירש appears to be used in the Samson stories even though the verb is in the Qal form (Judg 14:15).[494]

In other words, the Qal infinitive of ירש in Judg 14:15 (הלירשנו) looks and sounds nearly identical to what its form would be if it were in the Hiphil (הירשנו). As some commentators have noted, a scribe may have accidentally (haplography) or intentionally (harmonization) added the lamed (ל) when copying the text.[495] Nevertheless, both forms of ירש express the different ways the Philistines are treated throughout the Samson stories, which is to dispossess (Qal), drive out (Qal), destroy (Hiphil), and impoverish

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[492] Norbert F. Lohfink, "יָרַשׁ yāraš," *TDOT* VI:368–96 [esp. 383–93].

[493] Nelson, *Judges*, 248.

[494] One extant, medieval manuscript reads it in the Piel. See Bartusch, *Understanding Dan*, 145; and Butler, *Judges*, 313–14.

[495] Moore, *Judges*, 337.

(Hiphil) them, providing a type of polysemy through its multiple meanings. Furthermore, these different meanings of the word are reflected in the Greek translations of the text. The LXX^A emphasizes the Hiphil form of the verb ירש in its translation of Judg 14:15: ἢ **πτωχεῦσαι** ἐκαλέσατε ἡμᾶς ("Did you invite us **to be beggars**?"). Whereas the LXX^B emphasizes the Qal form of the verb ירש in its translation: ἢ **ἐκβιάσαι** ἡμᾶς κεκλήκατε ("Have you invited us **to force us out**?"). Even the use of the verb קרא ("to call") in Judg 14:15 has a subtle, double-meaning, which is either "to invite" or "to summon" someone to a feast (Judg 14:10), as it does in Akkadian when the Gods and people are invited (*qerû*) to celebrate at a banquet, festival, or offering (*qerītu*).[496] The final statement in the Philistines' coercion of Samson's unnamed bride can be understood in these ways then: "Did you invite/summon us here to destroy/dispossess/impoverish us?" (Judg 14:15).

Under the threat of extreme violence by her kinspeople, the Timnite woman addresses Samson with tears and questions his love for her because he challenged her fellow Philistines to a contest without revealing to her its meaning, even though Samson did not reveal it to his own parents (Judg 14:16). Like the rest of the story, there is ample intertextuality and wordplay employed by the authors. The verbs here echo language and themes throughout the book of Judges and DH, underscoring a connected compositional history with earlier textual traditions used throughout that corpus of literature.[497]

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[496] Ulrich Dahmen, "קָרָא *qārā*; מִקְרָא *miqrā*," *TDOT* XIII:109–35. CAD Q 240–43.

[497] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic*, 1–9, 320–65; Person, Jr., *Deuteronomic School*; Römer and de Pury, "Deuteronomistic Historiography"; Campbell and O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History*; Kratz, *Composition*, 153–221; Römer, *So-Called Deuteronomistic History*; idem, "Current Discussion"; idem, "So-Called Deuteronomistic History"; Schmid, "Emergence and Disappearance"; Nelson, "Double Redaction"; Fleming, *Legacy of Israel*, 39–176; Knoppers, "History as Confession?"; idem, "Constructing the Israelite Past"; and idem, "Israel to Judah."

As noted above, the first act by the unnamed wife of Samson is that she wept

(בכה) upon him. This exact form of the verb here (תבך) is found elsewhere in the Bible,

for example, when Hagar wept in the desert over her starving son (Gen 21:16), when

Jephthah's daughter and her companions wept in the mountains before her sacrificial

death (Judg 11:38), when David learns his firstborn son with Bathsheba has died (2 Sam

12:21), and when Josiah wept for Jerusalem after hearing a damning word from the

prophet Huldah (2 Kgs 22:19). Intriguingly, each of these actions of weeping includes a

major female character (i.e., Hagar, Jephthah's unnamed daughter, the Timnite woman,

Bathsheba, and Huldah) and the death or near-death of a child (i.e., Ishmael, Jephthah's

unnamed daughter, the Timnite woman, and David and Bathsheba's unnamed son). The

verb (בכה) occurs again in the next verse when Samson's wife continues to weep upon

him until he reveals the secret of his contest to her (Judg 14:17). The verb בכה derives

from the same root as the Akkadian verb *bakû* ("to cry, to mourn, to wail, to weep"),

which is also used when describing someone lamenting in tears, whether by an animal, a

human, or a god.[498] The former even includes a famous Mesopotamian incantation

describing the tears of a worm before the gods Shamash and Ea.[499]

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[498] CAD B 35–38 [esp. 36–37]. Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 50–51.

[499] Thus, lines seven and nine of the "Worm and the Toothache" read as follows: *illik tūltu ana pān Šamaš ibakki, ana pān Ea illakā dimāša* ("the worm went crying before Shamash, its tears flowed before Ea"). Similarly, Samson's wife wept over her husband for a week (Judg 14:17), Gilgamesh wept over the death of his companion Enkidu for seven nights (Gilg. X 58, 135, 235), and the Anunnaki gods wept with the mother goddess for seven nights over the great flood (Gilg. XI 125–29). In the Baal Cycle, Anat weeps for Baal after his death (KTU 1.6 I 9–10; 16–17). For more on the significance of weeping for a week in biblical (cf. Gen 50:10; 1 Sam 31:13; Sir 22:12; Judith 16:24) and Mesopotamian texts, see Abusch, *Male and Female*, 89–107.

While the Timnite woman is weeping over Samson, she finally speaks, and says

to him, "You must hate me" (רק־שנאתני).[500] The LXX[B] does not include an adverb in its

translation of those opening words to Samson, but simply reads, Μεμίσηκάς με ("You

hate me"). The LXX[A] includes the adverb at the beginning of its translation and reads,

Πλὴν Μεμίσηκάς με ("You must hate me"). The verb שנא ("to hate") is used many times

in the Bible, especially in the DH, both by God (e.g., Deut 5:9; 16:22) and humans (e.g.,

Joshua 20:5; 1 Kgs 22:8).[501] The Qal Perfect form of the verb used in Judg 14:16 is also

found when Yhwh is warning Israel against the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites,

including burning their sons and daughters in fire (Deut 12:31). Ironically, death by fire is

what happens to the unnamed daughter of Jephthah (Judg 11:29–40) and the unnamed

daughters from Timnah (Judg 14:15; 15:6). In both texts, the identities of the mothers are

unknown, however, the father of the daughters from Timnah is Philistine and Jephthah is

the bastard of a sex worker (Judg 11:1–3).[502] The verb שנא is also used after Amnon rapes

Tamar and his supposed love for his sister transforms into hatred (2 Sam 13:15). The verb

is used again when Samson's Philistine father-in-law assumes that Samson hates his

daughter (Judg 15:2) after she is given away to his companion (Judg 14:20). The verb שנא

is semantically parallel to the Akkadian verb *zêru* ("to dislike, to hate, to avoid") and its

nominal form *zērūtu* ("hostility, hatred"), which is also ascribed to gods and humans just

as שנא is in the Bible.[503] Furthermore, both שנא and *zêru* have a metaphorical meaning for

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[500] Some scholars argue that the adverb רק adds assertive force here (cf. Gen 20:11; Deut 4:6; 1 Kgs 21:25; Ps 32:6). Burney, *Book of Judges*, 364; and Boling, *Judges*, 231.

[501] Edward Lipiński, "שָׂנֵא *śānē*ʾ; שֹׂנֵא *śōnē*ʾ; מִשְׂנֵא *mᵉśannē*ʾ; שִׂנְאָה *śinʾâ*," *TDOT* XIV:164–74.

[502] For a detailed examination of these texts and father/daughter relationships in the Bible, see Joanna Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

158

the deterioration of covenants, which may be the larger, underlying Deuteronomistic theme in the Samson stories, since Samson continually pursues relationships with foreign women (cf. Deut 7:1–6; Josh 23:11–13; Judg 3:1–7; 1 Kgs 11:1–13).[504]

Along with this accusation of hatred is the claim that Samson does not love (אהב) his Philistine bride. Exum argues that the ultimate answer to Samson's contest with the Philistines is "love"—a conclusion shared by Gunkel—which is signaled by the authors' use of the verb אהב three times in the Samson stories (Judg 14:16; 16:4, 15) and the sexual frustration exhibited by Samson with each woman he encounters.[505] The two-sided accusation regarding hate (שנאתני) and love (אהבתני) in the first-person, common, singular provides assonance to the verbs, which Noegel generally treats as an aural effect of paronomasia.[506] The clause in Judg 14:16 reads as follows then: "You must hate me and you do not love me!" (רק־שנאתני ולא אהבתני). As noted above, the reason for this desperate plea is because the Timnite woman is under the threat of extreme violence by her people. Yet, what she instead tells Samson is that he has challenged her kinsmen to a language game (Judg 14:12–13) they cannot win (Judg 14:14) and has not even disclosed its

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[503] *CAD* Z, 97–99. For example, Ninsun petitions the sun god Shamash to protect her son Gilgamesh while battling Humbaba, which she describes as when Gilgamesh "annihilates from the land the Evil Thing that you hate" (*mim-ma lem-nu šá ta-zer-ru ú-ḫal-laq ina māti*(kur) (Gilg. III 54, 205); or when Utnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh the mystery of the great flood, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh how Ea instructed him to tell his people that "for sure Enlil has concealed a hatred for me!" ([*mi*]*n-de-ma ia-a-ši* ᵈ*en-lil i-ze-er-an-ni-ma*) (Gilg. XI 39).

[504] On the metaphorical meaning of שׂנא and *zêru* concerning covenant relationships, see Andrew J. Riley, "Zêru, "to Hate" as a Metaphor for Covenant Instability," in *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible – Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus*, ed. Bill T. Arnold et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 175–85. For Samson's problematic desire for foreign women according to the Deuteronomists, see Niditch, "Samson as Cultural Hero," 617–21; Exum, "Samson's Women"; Knoppers, "Sex, Religion, and Politics"; Camp, "Riddlers, Tricksters and Strange Women"; and Mobley, "Samson and the Three Women," 187–90.

[505] Exum, "Samson's Women," 82–84; and Gunkel, "Simpson," 54.

[506] Noegel, "*Wordplay" in Ancient*, 25–26.

meaning to her (Judg 14:16). Once again, the authors use נגד thematically as a push and pull between Samson and other characters in the story, especially female characters, regarding what is known and unknown in the narrative (cf. Judg 14:2, 6, 9, 12–17, 19), which continues in the major additions to the Samson stories (Judg 13:6, 10; 16:6, 10, 13, 15, 17–18). Here, it also accentuates the contrast between the different people groups, that is, between the Philistines and the Israelites.[507]

Thus, the Timnite woman emphasizes that Samson posed the challenge to "my people" (עמי), a phrase only used twice in the book of Judges, and both times in this story (Judg 14:3, 16). First, it is used by Samson's father and mother when they ask their son whether he would consider marrying a woman from among his own people (Judg 14:3). Second, it is used by the Timnite woman regarding the contest Samson posed to her kinsmen (Judg 14:16). The word is used similarly in the next verse after Samson reveals the answer to the Timnite woman, which she then discloses to "her people" (עמה). However, Samson's initial response to his bride's accusations is that he has not even revealed the meaning of his language game to his own mother and father. The verb נגד is used two more times in this response, once again in the Hiphil perfect, creating a compact yet rhythmic call and response between Samson and his bride, allowing the author to emphasize the ethnic tensions between the different people groups. The rest of the verse reads as follows: החידה חדת לבני עמי ולי לא הגדתה ויאמר לה הנה לאבי ולאמי לא הגדתי ולך אגיד ("You have challenged a contest to the sons of my people but have not revealed its

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[507] Hence, Niditch writes: "The threat to Samson's wife emphasizes the impossibility of unions with the Philistines from the writer's perspective. Upon penalty of death and the death of her family, she is coerced into betraying her husband. […] To be sure, the Timnite's dilemma evokes pathos; she is forced into betrayal by the Philistines. Her actions and interactions convey realistically a sense of bitter, local, ethnic tensions" (Niditch, *Judges*, 157–58).

answer to me!" And he said to her, "Look, to my own father and mother, I have not

revealed it! To you, then, should I reveal it?").[508] The repeated use of נגד in the Samson

stories (Judg 13:6, 10; 14:2, 9, 12–17, 19; 16:6, 10, 13, 15, 17–18) serves an emphatic

function in both polysemy and paronomasia, emphasizing a keyword or theme in a text or

series of texts.[509] The theme of that word (נגד) is revelation, or, more specifically, what is

known and unknown between the main characters in the Samson stories.

As noted above, the Timnite woman continues to weep upon Samson for the rest

of the wedding feast and presses him until he reveals the answer to his contest,

whereupon she reveals the answer to her people (Judg 14:17). The narrator says she wept

upon Samson for seven days and that on the seventh day he revealed it to her, causing

problems for interpreters who try to conflate each of the days in the story. This is because

Samson gives the Philistines seven days to figure out his language game (Judg 14:12),

but by day three they cannot figure it out by themselves (Judg 14:14), so on day four

(LXX) or day seven (MT) they coerce Samson's bride into drawing out the answer from

him (Judg 14:15), which she does on day seven (Judg 14:17).[510] Despite the various

solutions suggested by commentators for this intractable problem, the simplest one was

perhaps first offered by Rashi who proposed that the seven days of weeping narrated in

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[508] The unnamed mother of Samson reappears in this verse, as her frequent appearances earlier in the story (Judg 14:2–6, 9) cease at the beginning of the wedding ceremony up until now (Judg 14:10–15).

[509] Noegel, "*Wordplay" in Ancient*, 62–65.

[510] In Judg 14:15, both the LXX[A] and LXX[B] read "on the fourth day" (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τετάρτῃ); whereas the MT reads "on the seventh day" (ביום השביעי). On the one hand, it seems odd for the Philistines to wait seven days before coercing Samson's bride into obtaining the meaning of his חידה since it would hardly give her enough time to do so, it is also incoherent with the previous verse in which the Philistines cannot figure out the meaning of the חידה for three days (Judg 14:14), and it conflicts with the following verse in which Samson's bride presses him for seven days before he discloses the meaning of the חידה (Judg 14:17).

the text (Judg 14:17) simply refers to the remaining time of the seven-day feast (Judg

14:12) after the Philistines could not figure it out by the third day (Judg 14:14).[511] This

proposal not only makes narratological sense, but it is supported by the Greek translations

of the text. Moreover, it reflects the cultural and religious contexts of the story in which

seven days of celebration and weeping can be found in other biblical (Gen 50:10; 1 Sam

31:13; Sir 22:12; Judith 16:24) and ancient Near Eastern stories (Gilg. X 58, 135, 235; XI

125–29).[512] Once again, the keyword נגד appears, yet the reason Samson finally reveals

the answer to his Philistine bride at the end of the verse is because she pressed him to his

limit. The verb used here is צוק ("to constrain, press") and equivalent to the Akkadian

verb *sâqu* ("to constrict, make narrow"), which is also used metaphorically in similar

ways.[513] The verb צוק can only be found eleven times in the Bible (Deut 28:53, 55, 57;

Judg 14:16; 16:16; Job 32:18; Isa 29:2, 7; 51:13; Jer 19:9), more than half of which are in

Deuteronomistic texts when including the prose sections of the book of Jeremiah, which

many scholars consider Deuteronomistic (cf. Deut 28:53, 55, 57; Jer 19:9).[514] Weinfeld

argues that the use of the verb צוק together with the nouns that share the same (מצוק) or

nearly the same (מצור) roots in the books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah resemble the

language of Neo-Assyrian treaty formulas.[515] Thus, Weinfeld notes the following:

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[511] Moore, *Judges*, 336.

[512] Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

[513] H. Lamberty-Zielinski, "צוק; צוּק; צוּקָה; מָצוֹק; מְצוּקָה," *TDOT* XII:301–06. CAD S 169–70. Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 318–19.

[514] Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology*, 1–27; and Justus Theodore Ghormley, *Scribes Writing Scripture: Doublets, Textual Divination, and the Formation of the Book of Jeremiah*, VTSup 189 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 53–77 [esp. 56–58].

We hear of the materialization, as it were, of this category of curses in the annals of Assurbanipal, for instance, in the Rassam Cylinder: 'Famine broke out among them, and they ate the flesh of their children to satisfy their hunger. Ashur, Sin, Shamash…quickly inflected upon them as many curses as there are written in their treaty', and in another passage: 'In famine and want they ate each other's flesh.' In the passages treating of these catastrophes we generally encounter such terms as *sunqu*, *bubūtu*, *ḫušaḫḫu*, which denote famine and general want. So it appears that the expressions: הוסר כל מצור, מצוק which occur in an identical context in Deut. 28 (cf. Jer. 19:9) are the equivalents of these Akkadian terms.[516]

If indeed these words derive from the same Semitic root (*ṣwq*) and are being used in corresponding contexts and phraseologies, then how does that illuminate the way in which we understand the use of צוק in the Samson stories (Judg 14:17; 16:16)? Both of those texts involve Samson revealing a secret to a woman with whom he is intimately involved after being pressed to his limits. In Judg 14:17, צוק is in the Hiphil, as it is in every other text except for Judg 16:16, and it is translated in a variety of ways albeit with similar meanings. However, unlike in the Samson stories, the verb צוק is metaphorically used in military contexts in nearly every other way, including Yhwh punishing Israel (Deut 28:53, 55, 57) and Judah (Isa 29:2; Jer 19:9) with foreign armies, or rescuing the Judean exiles from Babylon (Isa 51:13). The verb is only used psychosomatically when Samson is pressured to reveal a secret to a woman he loves (Judg 14:17; 16:16) and when Elihu rebukes Job (Job 32:18). The use of צוק in these other Deuteronomistic (Deut 28:53, 55, 57; Jer 19:9) and/or prophetic texts (Isa 51:13) does not seem to be very illuminating for the Samson stories. Yet, one connection in these texts is the theme of exile. This possible reflection of other language in Neo-Assyrian treaties is perhaps

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[515] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic*, 126–29. For example, he compares Deut 28:53, 55, 57, and Jer 19:9 with VTE 449–50, 480.

[516] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic*, 127–28.

strengthened by the even more noticeable examples in the next verse, as noted above, in which there is clear paronomasia between the author's use of the very rare Hebrew word חֶרֶס ("sun") and חָרַשׁ ("plow") with the Akkadian word *erēšu* ("plow")—each of which corresponds to particular language and themes in Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty.[517] These Neo-Assyrian treaties were widely distributed to the central provinces of vassals during the seventh century BCE, including the kingdom of Judah, providing a possible point of contact.[518] However, whether these texts could have influenced the underlying message of the Samson stories, in which a single Israelite hero is depicted as subverting the Philistines, a supposedly more powerful people ruling over the land (Judg 14:4), is nearly impossible to determine.[519]

In the end, Samson finally reveals the answer to the Timnite woman after being pressed to his limits, which she then reveals to her people, presumably to save her life.

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[517] In the Bible, חֶרֶס only gets used four times (Deut 28:27; Judg 8:13; 14:18; Job 9:7). In one of those instances, Weinfeld draws a connection between the curses listed in Deuteronomy and Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (VTE). In particular, he lines up Deut 28:27 with VTE 419–421 (§39): "May Sin, the brightness of Heaven and Earth clothe you with leprosy and forbid your entering into the presence of the gods or king. Roam the desert like the wild-ass and the gazelle!" and Deut 28:28–29 with VTE 422–424 (§40): "May Shamash, the light of heaven and earth, not judge you justly. May he remove your eyesight. Walk about in darkness!" The otherwise inexplicable relationship between the divine punishment of skin diseases, blindness, and lawlessness in Deut 28:27–29 is elucidated by the same type of curses in Esarhaddon's treaty formulas (Weinfeld, "Traces of Assyrian."). Allusions here to many of the same themes in the Samson stories are plentiful, particularly the man punished with blindness (Deut 28:28), groping in the dark with no deliverer in sight (Deut 28:29), whose wife is given to another (Deut 28:30), and who is oppressed and crushed by a foreign enemy all the days of his life (Deut 28:32–34). There is even a connection between Shamash and plowing in VTE 545–46 (§68): "May Shamash with an iron plough [overtur]n yo[ur] city and your district." However, the word used for "plough" is *epinnu* (GIŠ.APIN), not *erēšu*. Nevertheless, *erēšu* is often used as an innuendo connecting the language of plowing with sex. Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age*, 225–26.

[518] On the possible influence of cuneiform treaty formulas on Deuteronomic texts, see Jeffrey Stackert, *Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch*, YAB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 86–109, 187–94. For the dissemination of cuneiform texts in the Levant during the Neo-Assyrian period, see Eckart Frahm, "The Intellectual Background of Assyrian Deportees, Colonists, and Officials in the Levant," *HeBAI* 11 (2022): 56–82.

[519] Carly L. Crouch, *Israel and the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, and the Nature of Subversion*, ANEM 8 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

Notable, in the MT, the Hebrew reads, "and she revealed the contest to the sons of her people" (ותגד החידה לבני עמה), whereas in the LXX^A and LXX^B it only reads "and she told the sons of her people" (καὶ αὐτὴ ἀπήγγειλεν τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτῆς). The use of החידה in the MT is the only example in the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15) where a word may have been added later by scribes in the Hebrew manuscripts.

On the seventh day, the struggle between Samson, the Philistine companions, and the Timnite woman reaches its denouement, and Samson, the trickster of the story, is surprised to learn that his opponents somehow tricked him, causing Samson to accuse the Philistines of not only deceit but a sexual liaison with his wife (Judg 14:18).

The Philistine companions are referred to as "the men of the town" (אנשי העיר) for the first time in the story, a phrase that is almost exclusively used in the DH (Josh 8:14; Judg 6:27, 28, 30; 8:17; 19:22; 1 Sam 5:9; 2 Sam 11:17; 2 Kgs 2:19; 10:6; 23:17). The phrase is similarly used in the Gideon stories (Judg 6:27–30), which Smith and Bloch-Smith argue "provide the *dramatis personae* for the socioreligious conflict that is about to unfold."[520] Likewise, the socioreligious conflict that erupts between Samson and the Philistines is sparked by the stolen answer to the contest. There even appears to be an increasing separation reflected in the different descriptions of the Philistines given by the authors of the story as the conflict escalates; thus they are called "companions" (מרעים) in v. 11, then "sons of my people" (בני עמי) in v. 16, then "son of her people" (בני עמה) in v.

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[520] Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 449. The primary difference between a city (עיר) and a town or village (חצר) in ancient Israel is that the city was a permanent settlement surrounded by a fortified wall, while the village was a less permanent settlement without a defensive wall and dependent upon the protection and support of a larger, fortified city. Although the author uses the term העיר ("the city") in Judg 14:18, Timnah (Tel Batash) was most likely a town or village and one of the "daughter" settlements to its "mother" city Ekron (Tel Miqne) during the time imagined in the Samson stories (cf. Josh 15:45), that is, the Iron Age I period. For more, see Fritz, *City in Ancient Israel*.

17, and finally "the men of the town" (אנשי העיר) in v. 18.[521] The most noticeable signifier

of wordplay by the author, however, is the rare use of the word החרסה for "the sun" (Judg

14:18). The MT reads, "before the sun went down" (בְּטֶ֫רֶם֙ יָבֹ֣א הַחַ֔רְסָה), but BHS proposes

that it should instead read, "before he entered her chamber" (בְּטֶ֫רֶם֙ יָבֹ֣א הַחַדְרָה). In other

words, before Samson enters her chambers to consummate his marriage. While חדר

("chamber" or "room") coincides with the next scene where Samson is denied access to

the Timnite woman's chambers (Judg 15:1) and is used again while Samson is cavorting

in Delilah's chambers (Judg 16:9, 12), the use of the archaic term for sun (חרס) provides a

clear example of paronomasia with the author's use of חרשׁ ("plow") in Samson's furious

response to the Philistines. Moreover, both the LXX[A] and LXX[B] use the Greek word

ἥλιος ("sun") in their translation of the Hebrew text.[522] The word חרס on its own is only

used four times in the Bible, three of which are in Deuteronomistic texts (Deut 28:27;

8:13; 14:18) and once in the book of Job (Job 9:7). In the DH, חרס is used in three

different ways, all of which relate directly or indirectly to the sun. First, to ritually

describe a type of burning itch cursed by Yhwh (Deut 28:27). Second, to spatially

describe a high place where battles occurred (Judg 8:13). Third, to temporally describe

the setting of the sun (Judg 14:18). The word חרס is also used in compound geographical

names early in the book of Judges, such as for the Amorites who continued to dwell "in

Mount-heres" (בהר־חרס) in Judg 1:35 and when Joshua is buried within his inherited

Ephraimite territory "in Timnath-heres" (בתמנת־חרס) in Judg 2:9.[523]

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[521] Spronk, *Judges*, 422.

[522] The only difference in the Greek manuscripts is whether it is before the sun sets or rises. Thus, the LXX[A] reads πρὶν δῦναι τὸν ἥλιον ("before the sun went down") whereas the LXX[B] reads πρὸ τοῦ ἀνατεῖλαι τὸν ἥλιον ("before the sun rose").

The combination of words revolving around symbols of the sun describing God, humanity, and the land are typical, then, of stories about Samson, whose name means "little sun," and many other textual traditions incorporated into the DH. Thus, regarding this use of חרס in the books of Joshua and Judges, Smith and Bloch-Smith write:

> Based on the name of Timnath-heres and other placenames (Beth-Shemesh, En-Shemesh, Ir-Shemesh, Har-heres, Maaleh-Haheres), solar worship has been considered pre-Israelite. It may also have been part of Israel's older religious practice. Later subordination of the sun under the figure of Yahweh (manifested in the solar worship in the Jerusalem temple of Yahweh in Ezek 8:16) might suggest a period of religious devotion to the sun among other deities including Yahweh. The books of Joshua and Judges are not simply disinterested in such a possibility but argue against it in representing Israel as monolatrous prior to entering the land. This ancient view rests less on historical grounds or evidence than on a vision of its past: this historiography is both a description of the past and a prescription for the present.[524]

The rest of the verse proceeds dialogically as the Philistine "men of the town" surprise Samson with their answer to his language game, which they pose in the form of a question winning the contest. The author again uses a playful alliteration of *mem* at the beginning of the first and last words in each clause of the response, as well as most of the words in-between, reflecting another example of *homoeopropheron*.[525] Samson's contest and the Philistines' response each only use six words and different types of parallelism, the former synonymous and the latter ascending.[526] The most significant differences between the contest and the response in the Hebrew and Greek texts are that in the LXX[B]

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[523] Jeremy M. Hutton, "Mahanaim, Penuel, and Transhumance Routes: Observations on Genesis 32–33 and Judges 8," *JNES* 65 (2006), 161–78 (p. 177).

[524] Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 160–61. For more about the book of Judges as a description of the past and a prescription for the present, see Smith, "Retrospective Deities."

[525] Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient*, 241–48.

[526] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 112.

Samson poses his πρόβλημα ("problem") as a question by including the pronoun τί ("what") at the beginning of the clause (Judg 14:14), and the Greek translators use different verbs in Samson's response to the Philistines (Judg 14:18). Thus, in Samson's response to the Philistine men of the town, the LXX[A] reads: "If you had not **tamed** my heifer, you would not have **found** my problem" (Εἰ μὴ **κατεδαμάσατέ** μου τὴν δάμαλιν, οὐκ ἂν **εὕρετε** τὸ πρόβλημά μου); whereas in the LXX[B] it reads: "If you had not **ploughed** with my heifer, you would have not **known** my problem" (εἰ μὴ **ἠροτριάσατε** ἐν τῇ δαμάλει μου, οὐκ ἂν **ἔγνωτε** τὸ πρόβλημά μου). Fernández Marcos notes how "the translator of Judges is a learned Jew and in a few cases he has recourse to the *figura etymologica* to maintain some Hebraisms or play on words of the original" including the paronomasia in Judg 14:18 (LXX[A]) that creates a "sonorous verse."[527] The verbs in the LXX[B] is more literally aligned with the Hebrew (MT), which can be seen clearly in its use of "ploughed" (ἠροτριάσατε), rather than "tamed" (κατεδαμάσατέ), as in the LXX[A].

There are multiple examples of wordplay that come to a climax in this verse as the quarrel between Samson and the Philistines reaches its tipping point, instigating a deadly bout of *lex talionis* for the rest of the stories.[528] Therefore, Samson's language game, the Philistines' answer, and Samson's response read as follows:

(MT Judg 14:14) מֵהָאֹכֵל֙ יָצָ֣א מַאֲכָ֔ל וּמֵעַ֖ז יָצָ֥א מָתֽוֹק
"From the eater, came out food to eat, from the strong, came out something sweet."
(MT Judg 14:18) מַה־מָּת֣וֹק מִדְּבַ֔שׁ וּמֶ֥ה עַ֖ז מֵאֲרִ֑י
"What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?"

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527 Fernández Marcos, "Septuagint Reading," 90.

528 Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24; Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 199–230; and Paynter, "'Revenge.'"

> (MT Judg 14:18) לוּלֵא חֲרַשְׁתֶּם בְּעֶגְלָתִי לֹא מְצָאתֶם חִידָתִי
>
> "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have achieved my contest."

The Philistines' answer is correct, at least on the surface, since they coerced the Timnite woman into revealing what Samson had revealed to her (Judg 14:15, 17), which is that he killed a lion (Judg 14:6) and ate honey from its corpse (Judg 14:8), something Samson kept secret from his parents (Judg 14:9) and initially from his Philistine bride (Judg 14:16). Yet, there is at least one unspoken answer to the Philistines' response to Samson, which is posed in the form of a question. That likely answer is a word that is used several times in the Samson stories (Judg 14:16; 16:4, 15) and one that describes Samson's feelings for foreign women who get him into dangerous trouble with the Philistines and that is the word for love (אהב). As noted above, other scholars argue that love is the ultimate answer to Samson's contest with the Philistines, many of whom also couple it with sex.[529] Indeed, the topics of love and sex are delicately intertwined by the authors, both in the language of Samson's contest and the answer by the Philistines in which strength (עז) and sweetness (מתוק) are central (cf. Song 2:3; 8:6).[530] Samson's response to the Philistines in which he metaphorically accuses them of having had group sex with his soon-to-be bride—חרש ("to plough") is in the second-person plural—makes the language even bawdier.[531] Claudia Camp describes the matter rather succinctly:

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[529] Gunkel, "Simpson," 54; Crenshaw, Judges, 117–18; Nel, "Riddle of Samson," 542; Exum, "Samson's Women," 82–84; Kim, *Structure*, 263; Camp, "Riddlers"; Eynikel, "Riddle of Samson"; Mobley, "Samson and the Three Women," 190, 195; Nelson, *Judges*, 249–52.

[530] Camp, "Riddlers," 122–38. Cf. Ezek 3:3, Ps 19:10, Prov 16:24, 24:13, 27:7.

[531] Shalom M. Paul "'Plowing with a Heifer' in Judges 14:18," in *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 163–69.

The narrative's conflictive agendas of Yhwh's occasion against the Philistines and the warning against strange sex are further thematized and further undermined by the riddle's metaphors of sweetness and strength. The process of untangling the lines between the riddle's challenge and response has already surfaced at least two issues—sex and love—bubbling underneath the war of words. The interrogative form of that response invites the reader not only to consider the ramifications of these two possibilities, but also to ask whether there are others.[532]

Defeated and shamed by his so-called "companions" (Judg 14:11) who deceitfully won the contest (Judg 14:18), Samson is overtaken by the spirit of Yhwh and travels to the fortified, Philistine city of Ashkelon, where he kills thirty men, takes their suits of armor, gives them to the wedding guests with whom he waged thirty linen garments (Judg 14:12), and returns in anger to his father's household (Judg 14:19).

Perhaps reflecting Samson's violent agitation, the author employs seven *wayyiqtol* verbs in rapid succession within this verse (Judg 14:19). The first of these verbs (צלח) reminds the audience that Samson is at times endowed with the spirit of Yhwh, which rushes upon him like other famous leaders and warriors in ancient Israel, namely Saul and David. As noted above, the verb צלח is used this way in the Qal form only in other Deuteronomistic texts, and only for Samson (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), Saul (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6), and David (1 Sam 16:13; 18:10), thereby drawing these texts closer together.[533] This action by the spirit of Yhwh often precedes acts of violence by those engulfed by such divine power, and this episode with Samson is no different.[534]

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[532] Camp, "Riddlers," 131.

[533] Brian N. Peterson, "Samson: Hero or Villain? The Samson Narrative in Light of David and Saul." *BSac* 174 (2017): 22–44.

[534] Levine, "Religion in the Heroic Spirit," 36; and Johnson, "'The 'Spirit of Yhwh.'"

On the one hand, the second verb simply notes how Samson went down to Ashkelon. On the other hand, the verb fits into the literary framework of the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15) as Samson frequently travels downward (ירד) and upward (עלה) between Israelite and Philistine territory throughout the Shephelah (Judg 14:1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 19; 15:6, 8–13).[535] But why does Samson travel all the way to Ashkelon, which is nearly thirty kilometers from Timnah? Why does Samson not instead go to a larger and nearer Philistine city, such as Ekron, which was about ten kilometers west of Timnah, or to Gath, which was about ten kilometers south?

Part of the reason may be that Samson did not want to be incriminated for the murder of Philistines near Timnah, so he went to Ashkelon instead. According to Deuteronomic law, unsolved murders are amended by the elders and judges of the cities nearest to the slain body or bodies (Deut 21:1–9). Furthermore, these crimes are expiated by taking a heifer to a wadi that has not been worked, killing her, and using her blood to atone for the innocent blood shed by the murderer.[536] Whether the authors of the Samson story knew of this ritual process written in Deuteronomy cannot be determined, however, the shared language and themes, such as the slain bodies, judges, heifers, and worked ground in both texts is intriguing.

Another, external reason may be that the longer and more arduous journey to Ashkelon heightens the tension in the story between Samson and the Philistines who

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[535] For the possible meaning of this literary theme, see Weitzman, "Samson Story"; idem, "Crossing the Border"; Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between"; and Thomas, "Samson Went Down."

[536] See Ziony Zevit, "The *'EGLÂ* Ritual of Deuteronomy 21:1–9," *JBL* 95 (1976): 377–90; David P. Wright, "Deuteronomy 21:1–9 as a Rite of Elimination," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 387–403; and Daniel L. Belnap, "Defining the Ambiguous, the Unknown, and the Dangerous - The Significance of the Ritual Process in Deuteronomy 21:1–9," *ZABR* 23 (2017): 209–21.

cheated and then defeated him in the contest. Samson not only travels all the way to the

Mediterranean coast, but he kills thirty Philistine men and takes their armor, then carries

it all back to Timnah to pay his wages. As shown above and below, the suits of armor

(חליצה) given to the Philistines instead of the linen garments (סדין) Samson initially

wagered (Judg 14:12–13) is another form of increased tension in the text. Thus, the not-

so-subtle signal to the Philistines who outwitted Samson is a warning to not cheat him

again since he is an angry and powerful outsider who can slay thirty, armed, Philistine

(presumably) soldiers without hesitation.

Another possible reason behind the text may be that if the story was composed

during the seventh century BCE, then that is the time when Ashkelon expanded and

flourished after the Neo-Assyrian campaigns into the Levant during the eighth century

BCE; whereas Judah was largely diminished and mostly restricted to Jerusalem and its

hinterland.[537] Thus, the city of Ashkelon became a major center of commercial trade

during the seventh century BCE with its immediate access to the Mediterranean, and it

steadily increased in importance among the fortified Philistine cities, which are often

referred to by scholars as the "Philistine Pentapolis."[538] Samson's deadly assault on

armed Philistines in the distant city of Ashkelon would be an even more incredible feat,

then, to the earliest audience of the story—something repeated later when Samson single-

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[537] Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, "The Final Destruction of Beth Shemesh and the *Pax Assyriaca* in the Judean Shephelah," *Tel Aviv* 30 (2003): 3–26; David Ben-Shlomo, "Philistia During the Iron Age II Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000-332 BCE*, ed. Ann E. Killebrew and Margreet Steiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 717–29; Faust, "On Jerusalem's Expansion"; Moyal and Faust, "Jerusalem's Hinterland"; and Younger, Jr., "Assyria's Expansion West."

[538] Lawrence E. Stager, Daniel M. Master, and J. David Scloen, *Ashkelon 3: The Seventh Century B.C.* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

handedly damages (Judg 16:1–3) and later destroys (Judg 16:21–30) the distant, fortified Philistine city of Gaza.

After his arrival into Ashkelon, Samson smote, literally "struck down" (וַיַּךְ), thirty men. The verb is often a deadly attack on multiple opponents, especially Philistines, at the hands of a single figure, seen, for example, with Shamgar (Judg 3:31), Samson (Judg 14:19; 15:8, 15–16), and the deadly attacks on the Philistines by Saul and David.[539] The latter is perhaps most notably captured in the song sung by all the women coming out of the towns of Israel: "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands!" (1 Sam 18:7). However, unlike the hundreds of Philistine foreskins given to Saul by his ambitious and young usurper, David (1 Sam 18:27), Samson takes the armor of the dead Philistines he slew and gives it to the Philistines who won the contest (Judg 14:19). There are several examples of wordplay here that repeat much of the language and themes articulated earlier in the story, which include the suits of armor (חליצה) taken from the slain Philistines and the changes of clothes (חליפה) given to those Philistines who revealed (נגד) the answer to the contest (חידה).

The term חליצה is only used twice in the Bible, once in the Samson stories (Judg 14:19) and once in the David stories (2 Sam 2:21). In Judg 14:19, scholars translate חליצה in a variety of ways, such as "clothes" (Butler; Frolov; Groß; Knauf; Matthews; Spronk), "garments" (Soggin), "gear" (Boling; Niditch), "plunder" (Schneider), "sashes" (Fox), and "spoils" (Auld; LaGrange; Nelson; Webb). However, Alter translates חליצה in Judg 14:19 as "armor" since its only other use is in a military context in which Abner pleads with Asahel to take the armor (חליצה) from one of the fallen soldiers after the battle at

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[539] J. Conrad, "נָכָה nkh; מַכָּה makkâ; נָכֶה nākeh; נכא nk'," *TDOT* IX: 415–423.

Gibeon (2 Sam 2:12–32). Like the heightened tension of Samson traveling all the way to Ashkelon and back to Timnah, the author describes how Samson upholds his end of the bargain (Judg 14:12–13) while also getting retribution for the Philistines who cheated him (Judg 14:15, 18) when he delivers the armor of thirty slain Philistines rather than simply delivering thirty linen garments (Judg 14:19). The Greek translators appear to have struggled with sorting out what exactly was being wagered and paid for by Samson throughout the story.[540] Thus, in place of "their armor" (חליצותם) and "the changes of clothes" (החליפות) in the Hebrew (Judg 14:19), the LXX[A] reads "their robes" (τὰς στολὰς) and "them" (τοῖς) while the LXX[B] reads "their clothes" (τὰ ἱμάτια) and "the robes" (τὰς στολὰς). What is not reflected in the LXX but in the MT is the paronomasia in the author's use of the very rare word for something stripped off a person (חליצה) and the very common word for something changed (חליפה). Both words used here have the same amount of syllables, initial sound, and a similar cadence, making them an example of *homoeopropheron*: הַחֲלִיפוֹת and חֲלִיצוֹתָם.[541] Furthermore, the roots of both חליצה and חליפה share the same two initial radicals with each other, חלץ ("to withdraw" or "equip for war") and חלף ("to pass on or away or through"), a form of *parasonance* which Noegel argues makes the hearer and reader distinguish between the two words and highlight the ways in which they are interconnected.[542]

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[540] LXX[A] uses "linen garments" (σινδόνας), "robes" (στολὰς), and "outer garments" (ἱματίων) in Judg 14:12–13, and "robes" (στολὰς) again in Judg 14:19. On the other hand, LXX[B] uses "linen garments" (σινδόνας), "robes" (στολὰς), "outer garments" (ἱματίων), "linen cloths" (ὀθόνια), and "alternate robes" (ἀλλασσομένας στολὰς) in Judg 14:12–13, and "clothes" (ἱμάτια) and "robes" (στολὰς) in Judg 14:19.

[541] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 241–48.

[542] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 256–61 [p. 261].

As noted above, the root ḥlp is common in all Semitic languages, and its verbal cognates can be found in Akkadian ḫalāpu ("to slip away"), Aramaic ḥălaf ("to pass away, change"), and Arabic ḫalafa ("to be the next in line, successor").[543] The literal and figurative use of חלף in the Bible includes divine (e.g., Isa 2:18; Job 20:24; Ps 90:5–6) and human (e.g., Judg 5:26; Isa 8:8; 21:1; Hab 11:1) violence, which often has an underlying political theme (e.g., Isa 8:8; 9:10).[544] If, indeed, the author of the Samson story is using a type of paronomastic wordplay here, then how might חלץ be literally and/or figuratively connected to חלף in Judg 14:19?

According to GKC, there are three independent, homonymous roots in חלץ with very different meanings, which are "take off, lay bare," "escape, withdraw," and "gird, strengthen." It is unclear, however, if this is the case, since other lexicons, including BDB, cite only one root.[545] Nevertheless, whether a single root with multiple meanings, or multiple roots with a single meaning, at least three of these recognized meanings reflect what happens to the Philistines in Ashkelon whom Samson slays and takes their armor. Furthermore, for authors/speakers or hearers/readers in the ancient world, there would not have been such a thing as separate roots with the same consonants, rather one word with many different meanings. Thus, Samson **takes off** the armor **strengthening** these Philistine men whose dead bodies now **lay bare** (Judg 14:19).[546]

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[543] Tengström, "חָלַף."

[544] Tengström, "חָלַף," 435. See Goldstein, "From Gods to Idols"; and Aster, *Reflections of Empire*.

[545] C. Barth, "חָלַץ *chālats*," *TDOT* IV:436–41.

[546] For similar uses of חלץ, see Num 32:20–21 (equipped for war) and Ps 7:4 (stripped bare).

The root meanings "to take off" or "to lay bare" are the clearest, since חליצה literally means "that which is stripped off" and it is the direct object of the verb לקח, which means "to take." In other words, what is taken (לקח) is that which has been stripped off (חליצה) the slain Philistines, leaving them bare in the streets. The root meaning "to gird" or "to strengthen" can be seen when Samson slays the Philistines in the fortified city of Ashkelon, rather than in Timnah, or any other Philistine settlement nearby. The Akkadian word for a fortress or fortified distract is ḫalṣu, which shares the same Semitic root as חליצה (ḫlṣ) and one of its meanings, and that is to strengthen, particularly for war.[547] Yet, the words in the Bible to fortify a city (בצר) and for the fortification itself (מבצר) are completely different than ḫalṣu and are not cognates with Akkadian (e.g., Deut 28:52; Josh 19:29; 1 Sam 6:18; 2 Kgs 18:13). Nevertheless, the act to "gird" or "strengthen" from the root verb חלץ can be taken from the violent contexts of the "armor" (חליצה) that previously girded and strengthened the slain Philistines in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19) and the slain servants of David and Saul after the battle at Gibeon (2 Sam 2:12–32). Barth argues how the root meaning "to escape" or "to withdraw" of חלץ (e.g., Hos 5:6) developed into the meaning "to deliver" and "to save"—perhaps from "cause to escape"—in the Bible (e.g., 2 Sam 22:20), which can be found throughout the Psalms and in some wisdom texts (e.g., Ps 6:4; 18:19; 34:7; 50:15; 81:7; 91:15; 116:8; 119:153; 140:1; Job 36:15).[548] The root, however, is not used for the central theme of

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[547] CAD Ḫ 51–52.

[548] Barth, "חָלַץ," 438–41.

delivery and deliverers in the book of Judges, including the Samson stories (Judg 13:5), which instead is the verb ישע ("to deliver").[549]

To return, then, to the question of how the root חלץ might have been creatively connected to the root חלף by the author of Judg 14:19 is to note how the multivalent meaning of חלץ and חלף reflect the death of the Philistines by the hand of Shamgar (Judg 3:31) and Samson in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19), Timnah (Judg 15:8), and Gaza (Judg 16:30), as well as their defeat by the Israelites under the leadership of Samuel in Mizpah (cf. 1 Sam 7:7–15).[550] These multiple meanings serve as further examples of paronomasia and polysemy by the authors of the Samson stories as their epic hero begins to shift the political leadership of the land from Philistia to Israel (Judg 14:4).

The costly wager is given over to the Philistines, then, who revealed the answer to Samson's contest. As shown above, it also reveals something deeper underlying the series of language games beneath the surface of the story.[551] Whether the clever wordplay used throughout the story is meant to derive from Samson the character, what Sasson describes as his "grander goal […] teaming with God," or it is intended as insider knowledge for the earliest and most astute audience of the Samson stories, what is revealed behind, inside, and in front of the text is a חידה in the fullest sense of the word.[552]

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[549] The verb ישע is used at least 21 times in the book (Judg 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15, 31; 6:14–15, 31, 36–37; 7:2, 7; 8:22, 10:1, 12–14; 12:2–3; 13:5).

[550] Neither place nor time are given for the defeat of 600 Philistines by Shamgar Son Anat (Judg 3:31), and he remains a rather mysterious, heroic figure. See Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 242–45; and Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges I*, 236–42.

[551] See also Baker, *Hollow Men, Strange Women*, 33–37.

[552] Sasson, "Samson as Riddle," 590. Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; and Camp, "Riddlers."

In the end, Samson returns in anger to the household of his father (Judg 14:19) where his connection to fire (cf. Judg 13:20; 14:15; 15:4–6, 14; 16:9) is seen again in the fact that his anger (lit. "nose") burned, and will burn even hotter once he learns what happened to his wife from Timnah (Judg 14:20; 15:2). Although the metaphor used here is the most common one for anger in the Bible, this specific description of Samson's anger is primarily used for Yhwh throughout the book of Judges (Judg 2:14, 20; 3:8; 6:39; 10:7) and may be the author's way of emphasizing the ongoing effects of the spirit of Yhwh that rushed upon him earlier (cf. 1 Sam 11:6).[553]

Following the thematic upward return home for Samson, the narrator adds this rather ambiguous closing detail to the narrative: ותהי אשת שמשון למרעהו אשר רעה לו (Judg 14:20). The verse appears to be missing a verb and it is not clear who the subject and object of the verb רעה are. Despite this ambiguity, most commentators and translators read it as the wife of Samson being given to one of the companions mentioned earlier in the story (Judg 14:11).[554] This typical reading is often based on Judg 15:2, in which the father of the Timnite woman clearly says to an angry Samson that "I gave her to your companion" (ואתננה למרעך). Therefore, Judges 14:20 is read by many in the following way: "And the wife of Samson became his companion, who had been a companion to

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[553] Spronk, *Judges*, 424; and Johnson, "'Spirit of Yhwh,'" 227–28.

[554] For example: "And Samson's wife was given to one of his companions who had been in his company" (Alter); "And Samson's bride became the wife of his best man, whom he had befriended" (Boling); "And Samson's wife was given to his companion, whom he had made his chief friend" (Burney); "Samson s wife now belonged to his companion who was his wedding companion" (Butler); "Now Shimshon's wife was [given] to one of his feasting-companions, who had been his [own] companion" (Fox); "Da wurde die Frau Simsons seinem Gefährten zuteil, den er sich als Brautführer zugesellt hatte" (Groß); "Et la femme de Samson fut pour le camarade qui lui avait servi de garçon d'honneur" (LaGrange); "Samson's wife was married off to that one of his wedding companions who had been his best man" (Nelson); "And the woman of Samson was for his companion, who had served as companion to him" (Niditch); "And Samson's wife became the wife of his companion, who had been his best man" (Webb); and "The wife of Samson was (given) to his companion who had been a companion to him" (Spronk).

him." Yet, while the subject and object of the verb נתן ("to give") are clear in Judg 15:2, they are not in Judg 14:20. Even the meanings of the verb היה ("to become") and רעה ("to graze") in their forms in Judg 14:20 are unclear, especially since the piel perfect of רעה (רֵעֶה) is a *hapax legomenon* and often read as a denominative verb. This ambiguity is also reflected in the different Greek manuscripts. The LXX[A], for example, notes that the unnamed woman from Timnah proceeds to live with Samson's best man while in the LXX[B] she is simply given to Samson's friend, with whom he had been friendly.[555]

What is rarely considered is the wordplay employed by the author, particularly following the language games emanating from Samson's contest with the Philistines. The author's use of the piel perfect of רעה, which most scholars translate as "had been a best man," is peculiar, thus the single use of that form of the verb in the Bible. However, the wide range of meaning ancient authors used for רעה and its different metaphorical usage throughout the Bible (e.g., 2 Sam 5:2; Isa 40:11; Jer 23:1–3; Ezek 34:13–15; Mic 7:14) makes the choice far less strange, especially given Samson's prior outburst with the Philistines (Judg 14:18).[556]

Accordingly, Samson responded to the Philistine companions who outwitted him by saying: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have achieved my contest!" Samson's opening line is clearly a sexual innuendo that uses the verb "plow" (חרש) and noun "heifer" (עגלה) as *double entendres*, thereby implying that the Philistines

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[555] Thus, the LXX[A] reads, "and Sampson's wife lived with his bridal escort, who was his companion" (καὶ συνῴκησεν ἡ γυνὴ Σαμψων τῷ νυμφαγωγῷ αὐτοῦ, ὃς ἦν ἑταῖρος αὐτοῦ); while LXX[B] reads, "and Sampson's wife was given to one of his friends, with whom he had been friendly" (καὶ ἐγένετο ἡ γυνὴ Σαμψων ἑνὶ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ, ὧν ἐφιλίασεν).

[556] G. Wallis, "רָעָה *rāʿâ*; רֹעֶה *rōʿeh*," *TDOT* XIII:544–53

were able to cheat him by having sex (i.e., plowing) with his wife (i.e., heifer).[557]

Noegel's describes the various ways in which ancient authors used *double entendres* as a

unique and subversive form of polysemy:

> *Double entendres* offer gentler ways of conveying matters that otherwise
> might be too explicit, offensive, or discomfiting. They also permit poets an
> escape from potential censure should they cross the line between decorum
> and taboo. Accordingly, *double entendres* can be as subversive as they are
> elusive. Since they primarily serve as euphemisms, they often blur the
> boundary between polysemy and metaphor. While poets often convey the
> literal or surface meaning of *double entendres* with exquisite literary
> artistry, they do not encourage listeners/readers to focus upon that reading,
> but instead compel them to entertain the euphemistic or risqué meaning.
> Thus, *double entendres* differ from other forms of polysemy that prompt
> one to contemplate both meanings simultaneously. They operate aurally
> and visually.[558]

Like many animals, the heifer is used metaphorically throughout the Bible, such

as to describe Egypt's beauty (Jer 46:20), Babylon's depravity (Jer 50:11), and Israel's

stubbornness (Hos 10:5, 11).[559] Hosea even compares the wickedness of Israel before the

great king of Assyria (Hos 10:6) to a heifer plowing wickedness throughout the land (Hos

10:11–13). The metaphors for livestock in general and the cow (i.e., calf-bearing) or

heifer (i.e., calf-less) in particular is used throughout the oral and textual traditions of the

ancient Near East.[560] For example, in the famous Mesopotamian myth of the moon god,

Sîn, and his heifer, the main subject of the story—and the object of Sîn's eye—is Geme-

Sîn, a barren (*lā ālittu*) but soon-to-be bearing (*ālidu*) heifer (*littu*), whom the god Sîn

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[557] Paul "'Plowing with a Heifer.'"

[558] Noegel, "*Wordplay*" in Ancient, 164.

[559] Helmer Ringgren, "עֵגֶל *ʿēgel*; עֶגְלָה *ʿeglāh*," *TDOT* X:445–51 [p. 451].

[560] Francesca Rochberg, "Sheep and Cattle, Cows and Calves: The Sumero-Akkadian Astral Gods as Livestock," in *Opening the Tablet Box: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Benjamin R. Foster*, ed. Sarah C. Melville and Alice Louise Slotsky, CHANE 42 (Leiden: Brill: 2020), 347–59.

adorns, appears to impregnate, and protects during her painful labor with the Lamassus from heaven.[561] In the Ugaritic version, it explicitly notes that Baal impregnates the heifer himself when transformed into a bull (KTU 1.5. V:19–21), a remarkably rare occurrence for the famous storm god.[562] The myth is filled with all sorts of wordplay and is perhaps better categorized as an incantation or fable to encourage the healthy birth of pregnant women, as seen in the final verse of many versions: "let the pregnant one give birth normally" (A1 KUB 4.13).[563]

What do all these metaphors about heifers and plowing have to do with a special companion to whom the wife (אשה) of Samson is given? Regardless of the strange syntax of Judg 14:20, the Timnite woman is not only the one who "will become" or "will be given" (ותהי) to Samson's companion, but she is also the one whom "he grazed" (רֵעֶה), that is, the one with whom he has had foreplay or sex (cf. Judg 14:15, 18). The use of רעה as a sexual metaphor is present throughout the Bible, especially in the Song of Songs. The verb רעה is a common euphemism for sex among lovers in that anthology of sensual poetry, often paired with the noun for lilies (Song 2:16; 4:5; 6:2–3). For example, "My lover is mine and I am his; he grazes among the lilies" (Song 2:16); or for an even more sensual example, "Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, grazing among

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[561] For the meanings of *ālittu*, *ālidu*, and *littu*, see CAD A/1 340–42, 350 and CAD L 217–20. There are at least two different types of the myth from which many duplicates and versions developed, ranging from the Late Bronze to the Neo-Assyrian periods, and read throughout the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Hittite empires. For more, see Noga Ayali-Darshan, "The Literary Development of the Myth of the Moon-God and His Cow: An Inquiry into its Mesopotamian Sources and Some Observations on the Related Ugaritic and Hittite Sources," in *Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas*, UF 50 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2019), 3–32.

[562] Ayali-Darshan, "Literary Development," 5 (n. 5), 30 (n. 87).

[563] Ayali-Darshan, "Literary Development," 8.

the lilies" (Song 4:5). The language and themes from the Song of Songs are often found within the Samson stories, something especially clear in the following chapter when the foxes destroy the fields and vineyards of the Philistines (cf. Judg 15:4–5; Song 2:15).[564] Thus, the unique use of the piel perfect of רעה by the authors of the Samson stories was unlikely an attempt to simply emphasize the friendliness of Samson's "companion" but rather another cutting remark about the deceitful Philistines who extorted Samson's wife for the answer to his contest (Judg 14:15), sexually forced themselves upon her (Judg 14:18), and gave her to the one who fondled her (Judg 14:20; 15:2).

The prevalence of wordplay has been emphasized in this opening chapter of the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15), particularly the use of paronomasia and polysemy by the authors, who appear to have kept one eye on the folkloric tales of a heroic wild man from the northern Shephelah and another on the looming shadow of the Neo-Assyrian empire over Judah during the seventh century BCE. The battle of brains and brawn

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[564] The following language and themes are shared between the two texts: זְרוֹעַ "arm" (Judg 15:14; 16:12; Song 8:6); חֶדֶר "chamber" (Judg 15:1; 16:9, 12; Song 1:4; 3:4); סֶלַע "cliff" (Judg 15:13; Song 2:14); מוּת "death" (Judg 13:7; 16:30; Song 8:6); חָפֵץ "to delight in" (Judg 13:23; Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4); שָׂדֶה "field" (Judg 13:9; Song 2:7; 3:5; 7:11); אֵשׁ "fire" (Judg 14:15; 15:5, 6, 14; 16:9; Song 8:6); שׁוּעָל "foxes" (Judg 15:4; Song 2:15), רָעָה "to graze" (Judg 14:20; Song 1:7–8; 2:16; 4:5; 6:2–3); "little sister" (Judg 15:2; Song 8:8), עֵז "female goat" (Judg 13:15, 19; 15:1; Song 1:8; 4:1; 6:5); דְּבַשׁ "honey" (Judg 14:8, 9, 18; Song 4:11; 5:1); אֲרִי "lion" (Judg 14:5, 8, 9, 18; Song 4:8); אָהֵב "to love" (Judg 14:16; 16:4; 16:15; Song 1:3–4, 7; 3:1–4; cf. Song 2:4–5, 7; 3:5, 10; 5:8; 7:6; 8:4, 6–7); נֶפֶשׁ "life" (Judg 16:16, 30; Song 3:1–4); עַז "strength" (Judg 14:14, 18; Song 8:6); מָתוֹק "sweetness" (Judg 14:14, 18; Song 2:3); גֶּפֶן "vine" (Judg 13:14; Song 2:13; 6:11; 7:8, 12); and כֶּרֶם "vineyards" (Judg 14:5; 15:5; Song 1:6, 14; 2:15; 7:12; 8:11, 12).

Intriguingly, the words for שמשון "Samson" (Judg 13:24; 14:1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 15–16, 20; 15:1, 3–4, 6–7, 10–12, 16; 16:1–3, 6–7, 9–10, 12–14, 20, 23, 25–30) and שושן "lily" (Song 2:1–2, 16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2–3; 7:2) are nearly homonymous.

For an introduction and commentary on the Song of Songs, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990); J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); and Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs = Shir ha-Shirim: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015). Surprisingly, Exum (*Song of Songs*, 129–31), Fishbane (*Song of Songs*, 77–78, 229), and Murphy do not draw the connection between the foxes and the fields in the Samson stories and the Song of Songs (*Song of Songs*, 139–41).

between the lowly Samson and the powerful Philistines provides a fitting allegory for the struggle between the vassal kingdom of Judah and its overlord Assyria. This type of political and religious satire would have been both entertaining and foreboding for Israelites and Judahites following the destruction of Northern Israel and the decimation of much of Judah near the end of the eighth century BCE.[565] Such clever and complex cultural resistance does not end here though, but only amplifies as Samson continues his deadly bout of *lex talionis* with the Philistines as the story unfolds.[566]

After some time, Samson returns to Timnah to visit his Philistine wife at her father's house (Judg 15:1), only then to discover that she has already been given to his companion (Judg 14:20), prompting her father to offer Samson his younger daughter (Judg 15:2). Samson not only rejects this proposal but uses it as an opportunity to declare vengeance upon the Philistines (Judg 15:3). While the text is now separated by a chapter division, the story is continuous with the previous verse (Judg 14:20) and connected by a transitional phrase used elsewhere in the Bible (Josh 23:1; Judg 11:4; 2 Chr 21:19) that reveals an unspecified amount of time between scenes: "And after a while" (Judg 15:1) That continuation in the narrative is also seen in the use of wordplay by the authors and in the themes underlying similar stories in the Bible (cf. Gen 29), including the DH (cf. 1 Sam 18).

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[565] When comparing Samson to the figures of Saul (Israel) and David (Judah), for example, Kratz notes how "Saul has become a cipher for the house of Israel, David a cipher for the house of Judah, and the Philistines, as in the Samson narratives in Judg. 13–16, are ciphers for the enemies of Israel and Judah at the time of the beginning of the monarchy. […] The only situation in which this view of things seems plausible is the time after the downfall of Israel around 720 BC, when Israel faced the choice of giving itself up or surviving in the state of Judah." Kratz, *Compositions*, 181.

[566] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24; Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 199–230; and Paynter, "'Revenge.'"

Despite the ambiguity around the amount of time between Samson's angry retreat

from (Judg 14:19) and return to (Judg 15:1) Timnah, the narrator sets this new scene

during the wheat harvest. Notably, wheat and barley were the primary cereal crops raised

in ancient Israel, with barley typically harvested in April and wheat in May.[567] In addition

to being the staple diet of ancient Israel and Judah, the wheat harvest held symbolic

significance in the Bible for both legal (Exod 34:22) and narrative (Gen 30:14; 1 Sam

6:13; 12:17; Ruth 2:23) texts. In Judg 15:1, it marks a time of springtime renewal for

Samson, whose wedding went awry and who is likely eager to consummate his marriage.

The wheat harvest also foreshadows what is about to unfold when Samson decides to set

ablaze the fields of the Philistines (Judg 15:3–5) after he learns that his Philistine bride

has been given away to his supposed companion (Judg 15:2).

Samson visits his wife at the home of her father with a young goat in hand,

following what was most likely the cultural and social etiquette of the day (cf. Gen

38:17).[568] The same type of goat is used to describe how Samson tore apart the lion in the

vineyards of Timnah (Judg 14:6), and it is the same type of goat offered by Samson's

father, Manoah, to the messenger of Yhwh during his birth story (Judg 13:15, 19). The

fact that a young goat (גדי עזים) is used as a meal (Judg 13:15), sacrifice (Judg 13:19),

metaphor (Judg 14:6), and gift (Judg 15:1) in the Samson stories emphasizes the

important roles that animals, including lions (Judg 14:5), bees (Judg 14:8), foxes (Judg

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[567] Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 32–38.

[568] Karel van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave – The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman*, trans. Sara J. Denning-Bolle (Sheffield Academic, 1994), 59–76 [esp. 74]. See, also, the review by Groß (*Richter*, 680–85). Groß and Spronk conclude that the Mesopotamian analogies are too far removed to apply to Samson's marriage to the woman from Timnah (Groß, *Richter*, 685; Spronk, *Judges*, 426).

15:4–5), donkeys (Judg 15:15), and a partridge (Judg 15:19), play in their folkloric features.[569] Samson's speech is curt with his father-in-law, as it was with his own parents when he first saw the Timnite woman (Judg 14:2). Thus, Samson says the following to his father-in-law: "I will go into my wife, [into] her bedroom" (אבאה אל־אשתי החדרה). The verb באה ("to come in") with the cohortative has at least two meanings here; it is both a description of Samson's intention to enter into the home and bedroom of his wife and an assertion to have sex with her. The latter can be seen throughout the Bible, including within similar situations between a father and his daughter(s) and son-in-law. For example, it occurs when Jacob informs Laban that he will be consummating his marriage with his younger daughter, Rachel, rather than his older daughter, Leah (Gen 29:21), and when David marries Saul's younger daughter, Michal, rather than his older daughter, Merab, as Saul intended (1 Sam 18:12–29). The verb באה is also used when describing the gathering of crops during the harvests (Lev 25:22; 2 Sam 9:10), something that playfully follows the setting of the scene during the wheat harvest (Judg 15:1). The "bedroom" (חדר) noted here is an inner, enclosed, residential space, which often involves sexual activity between two characters in the text, such as in the story of Samson and Delilah (Judg 16:9, 12), Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam 13:10), the lovers in the Song of Songs (Song 1:4), and even the eschatological speech by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:16).[570] Nevertheless, despite Samson's forceful demand, he is denied access to his wife by his

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[569] Hermann Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, trans. Michael D. Rutter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 51–70. For more on animal studies and folklore in the Bible, see Susan Niditch, "Folklore and the Hebrew Bible: Interdisciplinary Engagement and New Directions," *Humanities* 7 (2018): 1–20; and Phillip Sherman, "The Hebrew Bible and the 'Animal Turn,'" *CBR* 19 (2020): 36–63.

[570] For Judg 15:1, the LXX^A reads "bedroom" (κοιτῶνα) whereas the LXX^B reads "inner chamber" (ταμεῖον), of which the former (κοιτῶνα) is more personal.

father-in-law, who "did not allow him" (ולא־נתנו) to cross the domestic threshold. Once

again, the verb באה is used, but this time in opposition to Samson's expectations, that is,

Samson intends to "come into" his wife, while Samson's father-in-law does not allow

him to "come into" his home, let alone his oldest daughter. In that sense, the author uses

the verb נתן with the infinitive here meaning "to allow" (cf. Gen 20:6; 31:7; Exod 3:19;

12:23; Judg 1:24; 1 Sam 18:2; Hos 5:4; Ps 16:10; 66:9; 121:3).[571] The verb נתן is often

used throughout the Bible to describe when a woman is given to a man in marriage (Gen

29:28; 34:8, 12; Josh 15:16–17; Judg 1:12), including in the next verse of the story (Judg

15:2).[572] The Qal perfect of נתן is also used at the end of the story when Samson

acknowledges the victory that Yhwh has "given" (נתת) him over the Philistines (Judg

15:18).[573]

The wordplay in the father's response is evident in its rhetorical rhythm and

rhyme. Hence, the authors' triple use of אמר and double use of שנא with infinitive

absolutes for both verbs capture his seemingly befuddled state through alliteration: "And

her father said, I really thought you really hated her" (ויאמר אביה אמר אמרתי כי־שנא שנאתה).

The Qal perfect of שנא ("to hate") used by the Timnite father when addressing Samson is

the same form of the verb used by the Timnite woman when accusing Samson of hating

him at the wedding feast (Judg 14:16). Thus, as far as Samson knows, like father like

daughter—despite their innocence known to the hearer and reader of the story. Indeed,

the father and daughter from Timnah appear innocent, as the daughter is coerced into

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[571] Heinz-Josef Fabry, "נָתַן nāṯan," *TDOT* X:94.

[572] Fabry, "נָתַן nāṯan," *TDOT* X:99–100.

[573] Drawing upon Gerhard von Rad, Fabry notes how the cry "Yahweh has given…into your hands" belongs to the common language of holy war." Fabry, "נָתַן nāṯan," *TDOT* X:95–96.

discovering the answer to Samson's חידה (Judg 14:15) and the father clearly speaks the truth to Samson about giving his daughter away to another (Judg 14:20; 15:2).

As noted above, the verb שׂנא is used many times in the Bible (e.g., Deut 5:9; 16:22; Joshua 20:5; 1 Kgs 22:8).[574] The same form of the verb used in Judg 15:2 is also found when Yhwh is warning Israel against the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites, including burning their sons and daughters in fire (Deut 12:31). Ironically, death by fire is that with which the Philistines threaten the Timnite woman (Judg 14:15) and what also happens to her and her family (Judg 15:6). The verb is also used after Amnon rapes his sister, Tamar, and his perverse love for her transforms into hatred (2 Sam 13:15). The verb שׂנא is semantically parallel to the Akkadian verb *zêru* ("to dislike, to hate, to avoid") and its nominal form *zērūtu* ("hostility, hatred"), which is also ascribed to gods and humans just as שׂנא is in the Bible.[575] Furthermore, שׂנא and *zêru* have a metaphorical meaning for the deterioration of covenants, which, in fact, may be the underlying, Deuteronomistic theme in the Samson stories, since Samson continuously pursues relationships with foreign women (cf. Deut 7:1–6; Josh 23:11–13; Judg 3:1–7; 1 Kgs 11:1–13).[576]

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[574] Edward Lipiński, "שָׂנֵא *śānē'*; שֹׂנֵא *śōnē'*; מִשְׂנָא *meśannē'*; שִׂנְאָה *śin'â*," *TDOT* XIV:164–74.

[575] CAD Z, 97–99.

[576] On the metaphorical meaning of שׂנא and *zêru* concerning covenant relationships, see Andrew J. Riley, "Zêru, "to Hate" as a Metaphor for Covenant Instability," in *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible – Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus*, ed. Bill T. Arnold et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 175–85. For Samson's problematic desire for foreign women according to the Deuteronomists, see Niditch, "Samson as Cultural Hero," 617–21; Exum, "Samson's Women"; Knoppers, "Sex, Religion, and Politics"; Camp, "Riddlers, Tricksters and Strange Women"; and Mobley, "Samson and the Three Women," 187–90.

The next clause in Judg 15:2 is compact; however, the object of the verb is filled with linguistic references backward and forward in the story. Thus, the father of the Timnite woman tells Samson that he gave his daughter to his companion.[577] As noted above, the word used for the companion(s) or friend(s) in the story is only found seven times in the Bible, four of which are in the Samson stories (Gen 26:26; Judg 14:11, 20; 15:2, 6; 2 Sam 3:8; Prov 19:7). The noun מרע is derived from the verb רעה, meaning to "pasture, tend, graze," from which the more common word for "companion" or "friend" (רע) derives, which itself used throughout the book of Judges (e.g., Judg 6:29; 7:13–14, 22; 10:18). That word for friend (רֵעַ) is homonymous with the word for "bad" or "evil" (רַע) and is spoken by Samson in the next verse when he threatens to harm the Philistines (Judg 15:3). It is also used by the Philistines when asking who engulfed their crops in fields of flames (Judg 15:6). The authors therefore skillfully manipulate the words used to describe enemies and friends, goodness and harm, grazing and fondling (Judg 14:11, 20; 15:2, 6), each stemming from the same or nearly the same root (רע(ה. The author is again employing here a form of paronomasia that requires the hearer and reader to distinguish between the different but similar sounding words רֵעַ and רַע and discover the ways in which they are interconnected.[578] It is this type of activity by the biblical authors displaying the mastery of their native tongue that exhibits religious and social power in trying imperial contexts, showing the Philistines inside the text and the Assyrians outside the text who is superior through these "narratives of resistance."[579]

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[577] LXX^A reads "I gave her to your companion" (καὶ ἔδωκα αὐτὴν τῷ συνεταίρῳ σου) whereas LXX^B reads "I gave her to one of those from among your friends" (καὶ ἔδωκα αὐτὴν ἑνὶ τῶν ἐκ τῶν φίλων σου).

[578] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 256–61 [p. 261].

Thus, having denied Samson access to his home and older daughter because he thought Samson hated her, the Timnite father straightforwardly asks Samson: "Is not her younger sister better than she? Let her become yours instead of her" (Judg 15:2). The authors use the very common verb היה ("to become") in the Qal imperfect, as they did in Judg 14:20, to indicate the possession of a wife, that is, a woman becoming the wife of a man (cf. Lev 21:3; Deut 24:2; Jer 3:1; Ezek 16:8; Hos 3:3; Ruth 1:13). The response by Samson's father-in-law, in which one of his daughters is offered for another, is found throughout the Bible, including three times in the DH, and an example of a biblical type-scene (e.g., Gen 19; 29; Judg 19; 1 Sam 18).[580] Unfortunately, the sisters in the Samson stories are nameless and voiceless, ostensibly reduced to objects of exchange between their father and potential husbands.[581] This erasure of a female character's identity is common, and Niditch explains that this type of "exchange of a woman is a matter of power relations between men, a contest for relative status."[582] Spronk sees the parallels between these marriage stories involving older and younger daughters with Samson and David as another example of the book of Judges foreshadowing what is to come in the books of Samuel and Kings.[583] Furthermore, the failure of Samson to consummate—let alone maintain—a marriage with the Timnite woman, while David successfully does both

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[579] Bedford, "Assyria's Demise as Recompense."

[580] Alter, *Art of Biblical*, 59–78.

[581] Bachmann, *Judges*, 174.

[582] Niditch, *Judges*, 158.

[583] Spronk, *Judges*, 426.

with Michal, the daughter of Saul, is another way in which Samson serves as a foil to

future, Israelite leadership in the DH.[584]

Having been prevented by his Timnite father-in-law, Samson declares his

vengeance: "And Samson said to them, 'I am clear this time from the Philistines, for I am

going to do them harm!'" (Judg 15:3). The authors use the verb נקה ("to be empty or

clean") in the Niphal, which is employed metaphorically throughout the Bible, meaning

to be acquitted or forgiven (cf. Num 32:22), that is, to be freed from guilt (1 Sam 26:9;

Jer 2:35), iniquity (Num 5:31; Ps 19:13), or punishment (Exod 21:19; Jer 25:29).[585] The

Akkadian word *naqû* ("to pour out a libation") and נקה appear to derive from the same

root, both of which mean something like "to be emptied."[586] The alternate meanings for

naqû, "to shed blood," and for נקה, "to avenge," provide a tantalizing subtext for the use

of נקה in Judg 15:3, then, in which Samson proceeds to both seek vengeance and shed the

blood of the Philistines.[587] The only passage in the Bible where many scholars agree that

נקה likely means "vengeance" is at the end of the book of Joel where Yhwh declares:

"**And I will avenge** (ונקיתי) their blood and I will not clear the guilty" (Joel 4:21).[588]

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[584] Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists."

[585] G. Warmuth, "נָקָה *nāqâ*," *TDOT* IX:553–63.

[586] AHw, 744–45; CAD N/1 336–41; and Warmuth, "נָקָה *nāqâ*," 553–54.

[587] CAD N/1 338.

[588] For example, John Barton notes the following: "In v. 21 there is a problem of interpretation. MT reads *wĕniqqêtî dāmām lō'-niqqêtî*, which, as the NRSV footnote has it, means something like 'I will hold innocent their blood which I have not held innocent.' Various suggestions have been made to improve the sense. The simplest is the proposal in *BHS* that the first *niqqêtî* should simply be omitted, producing 'I will not hold their blood innocent,' i.e., 'I will not forgive them for their violence.' LXX, however, seems to have read a text with two verbs and renders *kai ekzētēsō to haima autōn kai ou mē athōōsō*, 'I will avenge their blood and will not put it away,' which may suggest that the first *niqqêtî* should be read as *wĕniqqamtî*, 'I will avenge,' and the second *'ănaqqeh*, 'I will declare innocent,' thereby yielding the NRSV rendering, which I follow (thus also Crenshaw)." John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 109.

According to this secondary, perhaps even primary, meaning, Samson would forcefully say: "I will avenge the Philistines this time when I do them harm!" (נקיתי הפעם מפלשתים כי־עשה אני עמם רעה). This reading is more consistent with the core Samson stories as Samson slays hordes of Philistines without hesitation (Judg 14:19; 15:8; 15).

As noted above, פעם is used here and repeatedly throughout the Samson stories in direct speech, drawing attention to the hearer or reader of the action about to unfold. In Judg 15:3, it draws attention to Samson, who is about to make the next move in an ongoing series of retaliation, which began with the Philistines coercing the answer to Samson's contest from his wife (Judg 14:15) and continued with Samson slaying thirty Philistines in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19).[589]

The final piece in this linguistic puzzle is Samson's vow to do רַע ("evil, harm") to the Philistines (cf. Gen 26:29; 2 Sam 13:16).[590] In the previous verse, the father of the Timnite woman tells Samson that he gave his daughter to Samson's מרע, a word that derives from the verb רעה. The verb רעה is the root of the more common word for "companion" or "friend" (רֵעַ), and both are homonymous with the word for "evil" or "harm" (רַע), which is used by Samson (Judg 15:3) and by the Philistines when asking who incinerated their fields (Judg 15:6). As shown above, the singular use of the Piel perfect of רָעָה was almost certainly not an attempt by the authors to highlight the friendliness or significance ("best man") of Samson's companion; but rather another callous remark about the Philistines, who extorted the Timnite woman for the answer to Samson's contest (Judg 14:15), sexually forced themselves upon her (Judg 14:18), and

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[589] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24; Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 199–230; and Paynter, "'Revenge.'"

[590] In Judg 15:3, LXX^A reads "mischief" (κακά), whereas LXX^B reads "evil" (πονηρίαν).

gave her to the companion who likely fondled her (Judg 14:20).[591] Paranomasia imbues

this web of meaning-making and requires the hearer and reader to discern between these

related and very similar sounding words, מֵרֵעַ ("companion"), רֵעַ ("friend"), רַע ("harm"),

רָעָה ("graze"), and discover the ways in which they are interconnected, both literally and

metaphorically.[592] In short, Samson was initially meant to be a companion (מרע) with the

Philistines (Judg 14:11), even a friendly (רע) one (Jug 14:20), but he quickly became their

enemy (רע) instead (Judg 15:3) and never looked back (Judg 15:7–20).

After Samson boldly declares his enemies and plans to harm them (Judg 15:3), he

begins his creative attack on the Philistines from Timnah (Judg 15:4–5), which not only

draws their ire but results in the fiery death of the Timnite woman and her entire

household (Judg 15:6), leading Samson to take vengeance on the Philistines and retreat

into the rocky wilderness (Judg 15:7–8).

Thus, at the start of this new scene, the narrator notes how "Samson went and

captured three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned tail to tail, and put a torch in-

between the two tails" (Judg 15:4). As shown above, the number three has folkloric value

here and corresponds to the other explicit intervals of three throughout the Samson stories

(Judg 14:11–13, 19; 15:4–5, 11; 16:15, 17).[593] The number of foxes (שלש־מאות) used to

destroy the Philistines' fields (Judg 15:4) matches the number of men (שלש מאות) Gideon

uses to destroy the Midianites (Judg 7:6–8). Moreover, both Gideon and Samson use

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[591] As shown above (pp. 154–57), the Timnite woman is not only the one who "will become" or "will be given" (ותהי) to Samson's companion (Judg 14:20), but she is also the one whom "he grazed" (רעה), that is, the one with whom he has had foreplay or sex (cf. Judg 14:15, 18). The use of רעה as a sexual metaphor is throughout the Bible, especially in the Song of Songs (Song 1:7–8; 2:16; 4:5; 6:2–3).

[592] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 256–61 [p. 261].

[593] Alter, "Samson without Folklore." See, also, pp. 122–23 above.

torches for their attack (Judg 7:16, 20; 15:4–5), drawing another direct literary connection between both stories. The verb describing how Samson "captures" (לכד) the foxes is only used in one other instance for capturing wild animals in the Bible, which is when Yhwh compares the assurance of Israel's punishment to a young lion who roars from his den after failing to capture his prey (Amos 3:4) and a snare that does not snap because a bird has yet to enter its trap (Amos 3:5). The word לכד also shares the same root (*lkd*) as the verb *lakādu* ("to run") in Akkadian, which in most of its usages involves a lion and a wolf (CAD L 45)—the latter of which shows up alongside a dog and a fox in the popular Mesopotamian disputation poem, *Series of the Fox*.[594] For example, "the firstborn son forges his way like a lion" (*i-lak-kid labbiš rabi aḫi uruḫšu*); or "like a lion it (the arrow) is swift in flight, like a wolf it is …. in movement" (*kīma nēšim e-ez alāka kīma barbarim la-ka-ta ma-ad-x*); or "full of terror like a lion, free to run like a wolf" (*kīma nēši ma[li] puluḫ[ta] kīma barbari la-ka-da uššur*).[595] The verb לכד is also frequently used throughout the DH to describe when Israel or Judah has captured city or cities of an enemy.[596] The authors' use of the verb לכד ("to capture, seize, take") here in the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15) also distinguishes it from the different verb used for seizing (אחז) in the next chapter (Judg 16:3, 21), possibly serving as another indicator of Judg 16

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[594] W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960): 186–209; and Enrique Jiménez, *The Babylonian Disputation Poems: With Editions of the Series of the Poplar, Palm and Vine, the Series of the Spider, and the Story of the Poor, Forlorn Wren*, Culture and History of the ancient Near East 87 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 39–56, 378–95.

[595] CAD L 45.

[596] See, for example, Josh 6:20; 8:19, 21; 10:1, 28, 32, 35, 37, 39, 42; 11:10, 12, 17; 15:16–17; 19:47; Judg 1:8, 12–13, 18; 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 5:7; 8:4; 12:26–29; 1 Kgs 9:16; 16:18; 2 Kgs 12:17. The verb לכד occurs 117 times in the Bible, 55 of which are in the DH, and 21 of which are in the book of Jeremiah, which is itself likely a Deuteronomic composition. For more on the meaning and usage of לכד and the verb *lkd* in other semitic languages, see H. Gross, "לָכַד *lākad*," *TDOT* VIII:1–4.

being an addition to the compositional history of the text.[597] Furthermore, the use of the

verb לכד for seizing is found in what is generally agreed upon by scholars as the older

parts of the book of Judges (Judg 3:28; 7:24–25; 8:12, 14; 9:45, 50; 12:5), whereas the

verb אחז is found in what is generally thought to be its later parts (Judg 1:6; 12:6;

20:6).[598]

The language and themes of the foxes is found in both biblical and extrabiblical

texts from the ancient Near East. The Song of Songs, for example, is again paralleled

with the Samson stories (Judg 15:4; Song 2:15). Hence, just as Samson captures foxes

and uses them to destroy the fields and vineyards of the Philistines, so does the woman

playfully say to her beloved: "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the

vineyards, for our vineyard is in bloom" (Song 2:15).[599] The first-person plural of the

woman in this and other passages from the Song of Songs (Song 1:4; 8:8–9) has long

perplexed interpreters, often leading them to conclude that the woman is speaking on

behalf of herself and a chorus of young women (Song 1:3) when addressing her lover.

Shalom Paul demonstrated, however, that this was a literary and rhetorical feature

expressing the ardent, sensual feelings of a female character throughout love poetry in the

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[597] The other indicators are explored in detail below in the following chapter on Judg 16.

[598] Amit, "Book of Judges – Dating and Meaning"; and Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 18–34.

[599] In the Song of Songs 2:15–16, we see the following language and themes shared with the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15): שׁוּעָל "foxes" (cf. Judg 15:4; Song 2:15); רָעָה "to graze" (cf. Judg 14:20; Song 1:7–8; 2:16; 4:5; 6:2–3); and כֶּרֶם "vineyards" (cf. Judg 14:5; 15:5; Song 1:6, 14; 2:15; 7:12; 8:11, 12). Intriguingly, the words for שמשון "Samson" and שושן "lily" (Song 2:16) are nearly homonymous.

Exum (*Song of Songs*, 129–31), Fishbane (*Song of Songs*, 77–78, 229), and Murphy (*Song of Songs*, 139–41) do not draw the connection between the foxes and the fields in the Samson stories and the Song of Songs in their commentaries, nor do any of the commentators on the Samson stories. The few sources that appear to draw this connection—and only in passing—are S. Fischer, "The Foxes that Ruin the Vineyards – A Literal Interpretation of Song of Songs 2:15," *Acta Theologica* 22 (2003): 76; Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*, 261–62; and Groß, *Richter*, 704.

ancient Near East, including in the Song of Songs, which he described as the "plural of ecstasy."[600] Thus, in reference to Song 2:15, Paul notes how the "enigmatic but patently erotic overtones of this verse are palpable…'Catch *us* foxes, little foxes, that spoil vineyards,' especially when it is realized that כרמ 'vineyard,' is a well-attested poetic symbol for the female body, well-documented in Sumerian and Akkadian poetry as well as in the Song of Songs itself (1:6; 8:12)."[601] The "vineyards" (כרמ) are precisely what Samson destroys by way of the ignited tails of three hundred loose foxes (Judg 15:5). Here, too, we see another *double entendre*, since "tail" (זָנָב) is commonly used in the ancient world as a euphemism for a penis (cf. Akk. *zibbatu*); moreover, the rare verb from which the noun for tail derives in Hebrew (זָנַב) means "to attack from the rear," or literally "to cut off or smite the tail" (Deut 25:18; Josh 10:19).[602] It appears, then, that the authors are cleverly narrating how Samson turns the tables on his Philistine adversaries. In other words, because the Philistines "plowed" Samson's "heifer" (Judg 14:18), that is, had sex with his Philistine bride-to-be, Samson captures the "tails" of the foxes and destroys the "fields" and "vineyards" (cf. Song 2:15) of the Philistines in fire (Judg 15:4–5), that is, Samson seizes "the uncircumcised" (הערלים) Philistines (Judg 14:3; 15:8) by their flaming genitalia and proceeds to emasculate them.

Further wordplay is possibly found in the *paronomasia* between the word used for "foxes" (שועלים) and the unwritten but implied word for "handful" (שעלים), as Samson's

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[600] Shalom M. Paul, "The Plural of Ecstasy in Mesopotamian and Biblical Love Poetry," in *Divrei Shalom – Collected Studies of Shalom M. Paul on the Bible and ancient Near East 1967–2005* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 239–52.

[601] Paul, "Plural of Ecstasy," 251–52.

[602] CAD Z 100–02 [p. 102]. For example, "the enemy will make a surprise attack on your rear" (*zi-ib-ba-at ummānika nakrum išaḫḫiṭ*).

hands are very full capturing three hundred foxes, tying their tails together, and lighting

them on fire. Indeed, Samson's hands are anatomical objects of interest that frequently

appear in the core Samson stories, whether he is handling animals (Judg 14:6, 9; 15:4–5),

miraculously escaping bondage (Judg 15:12–14), or single-handedly slaying Philistines

(Judg 15:17–18). Even the verb used to describe how Samson sent (שלח) the three

hundred foxes into the fields of the Philistines (Judg 15:5) shares two radicals with the

root word for foxes (שועל) producing an anagram.[603] Regarding foxes themselves, they

are found throughout the Bible (Judg 15:4; Neh 4:3l; Ps 63:10; Song 2:15; Lam 5:18;

Ezek 13:4) and other texts from the ancient Near East (CAD Š2 268–70), and they are

typically presented as agile and cunning characters. Although some commentators, such

as Boling and Groß, argue that the foxes in the Samson stories (Judg 15:4) are, in fact,

jackals, the distinction between these animals in the Bible is clear in their different

names, "foxes" (שועלים) and "jackals" (איים), and in their descriptions (cf. Isa 13:22;

34:14; Jer 50:39), and because foxes were common throughout that region during that

time, and continue to be today.[604] The word used for fox in Hebrew (שועל) shares the

same root with the one in Akkadian (*šēlebu*) and Amorite (*šuḫal*), both of which are in

the names of towns and villages listed for the tribes of Judah (Josh 15:28; 19:3), Dan

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[603] Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient Near Eastern*, 273–77.

[604] Boling, *Judges*, 235; and Groß, *Richter*, 704. Moore, recognizing the proper genre of the story, cleverly noted the following: "The ingenious form which his revenge takes is one of those strokes of rude wit which folk-stories delight. Many interpreters, reflecting that the solitary habits of the fox would make it very difficult to catch such a number, and that Samson's great strength would be of no avail in such an undertaking, suppose that the author meant jackals, which roam in packs, and could easily, it is said, be caught by the hundred. The decision of the question is of importance only to those who take the story as a veracious account of an actual occurrence" (Moore, *Judges*, 340–41). Furthermore, both the LXX[A] and LXX[B] use the Greek word for "fox" (ἀλώπηξ) in Judg 15:4. On the distinction between and presence of foxes and jackals in ancient Israel, see Borowski, *Every Living Thing*, 203–04.

(Josh 19:42; Judg 1:35), and Benjamin (1 Sam 13:17), as well as for the same territory in

the northern Shephelah during the reign of Solomon (1 Kgs 4:9).[605] These local territories

in Judah known for their association with the sun (Beth-shemesh) or foxes (Hazar-shual

and Shaalabbin) provide a rich and tantalizing texture to the world behind the Samson

stories. Likewise, foxes appear in folkloric wisdom texts from the Bible and ancient Near

East, such as the Samson stories and popular Mesopotamian poem, *Series of the Fox*.[606]

One part of the *Series of the Fox* that parallels the seemingly unique imagery in the

Samson stories—something almost always unnoticed by biblical scholars—is the

following speech by the main character, Fox, when addressing his adversary, Wolf:

> [12]The Fox answered, weeping bitterly, His heart grew incensed, and his
> tears were profuse; [13]He addressed them, "You, Wolf, are an image of
> backbiting, [14]An evil-doer, who cuts his friend's throat. [15]Why do you
> spread flame to the glowing reed..? [16]Send up smoke from the parched
> thicket? [17]Set ablaze [.] . the pitch wells? [18]Ignite constantly the alkali [in]
> the potter's kiln? (b rev. 12–18)[607]

While Fox accuses Wolf of spreading flame to the flowing reed and sending up

smoke from the parched thicket and setting ablaze the pitch wells and igniting the alkali

in the potter's kiln, it is most likely Fox himself who is guilty of deviously playing with

fire. Thus, regarding the craftiness of Fox when speaking to his fellow animals, Enrique

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[605] Those names are the "village of the fox" (חצר שועל) in Josh 15:28, 19:3, "hill of foxes (שעלבים)
in Josh 19:42, Judg 1:35, and 1 Kgs 4:9, and "land of the fox" (ארץ שועל) in 1 Sam 13:17. For more on the
different meanings of שועל in the Bible, see M. J. Mulder, "שׁוּעָל *šûʿāl*" *TDOT* XIV:537–40.

[606] For more, see Szilvia Sövegjártó, "The Fox in Ancient Mesopotamia: From Physical
Characteristics to Anthropomorphized Literary Figure," in *Fierce Lions, Angry Mice and Fat-tailed Sheep -
Animal Encounters in the ancient Near East*, ed. Laerke Recht and Christina Tsouparopoulou (Cambridge,
UK: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2021), 95–102.

[607] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 195. See, also, pp. 187–89. Guillaume identifies
Series of the Fox, along with numerous other Mesopotamian texts and mythologies, as reflecting the loose
foxes in the Samson stories, however, he does not address these passages. For more, see Guillaume,
Waiting for Josiah, 178–82.

Jiménez notes how "Fox appears in the *Series* trying to accuse Wolf of crimes Fox probably committed (thus in § E obv), praising Dog and Lion in order to avoid being eaten by them (§ b r 1–11 and § E iv 11–16), and plotting to kill Dog (§ Z o 14–16)."[608] Similarly, Herman Vanstiphout argues that Fox is "the most individualized actor by far" in the poem and that "his command of rhetoric is the effective and gradual construction of a series of reproaches, all of them constructed around the motif of 'fire' and culminating in a proverbial expression."[609] Fox even attempts to persuade the sun god, Šamaš, whose presence in the sky grants him worldwide vision and presumably fair judgment of all that occurs under it, to acquit him of his crimes:

> [17]Šamaš, do not let the persecutor escape from your judgement. [18]Let them kill the wise one, the sorcerer, the Fox." [19]When the Fox heard this he lifted his head, weeping to Šamaš, [20]His tears came before the ray of Šamaš, [21]"Do not arraign me, Šamaš, in this judgement.[610]

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one finds the following proverb in Akkadian: "Where can the fox get away from Šamaš? (*šēlebu lapan Šamaš êkīam illak*)"[611] But what does the Bible have to do with Babel? The fact that a popular, folkloric, wisdom text with a fox burning down the fields of enemies (i.e., flowing reed, parched thicket, pitched wells, saltwort plants) is found throughout the ancient Near East, including among the practice tablets of first millennium scribal students, while another

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608 Jiménez, *Babylonian Disputation Poems*, 47–48.

609 Herman Vanstiphout, "The Importance of 'The Tale of the Fox,'" *Acta Sumerologica* 10 (1988): 201.

610 Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 201. See, also, pp. 187–89.

611 CAD Š/2, 268–70 [p. 268].

popular, folkloric, wisdom text, overlapping in time and possibly place, includes a fox burning down the fields of enemies (i.e., standing grain, vineyards, olive groves), raises the possibility that these texts ultimately derive from the same wisdom traditions created by scribal masters convinced that they were preserving cultural and divine wisdom in their minds and through their written texts.[612]

Yet, instead of looking to ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Bible (Song 2:15), nearly all possible literary parallels raised by biblical scholars about the foxes in the Samson stories are taken from Greco-Roman literature written as late as the first century C.E. onward.[613] For example, in the six-part, calendrical, Latin poem, *Fasti*, Ovid writes how the young son of a farmer caught a troublesome vixen and set it on fire, only for it to escape and accidentally set the local fields ablaze, leading the town to ceremoniously sacrifice a fox at the annual festival for the corn god Ceres (*Fasti* IV, 679–712). Likewise, a similar story is told in one of Aesop's fables, in which a farmer wishing to punish a menacing fox sets its tail on fire, only then to have it escape and spread flames across his fields. However, due to Ovid confusing the festivals of *Robigalia* with *Augurium canarium*, both of which included the sacrifice of a dog rather than a fox, Guillaume demonstrates how the indirect connections between the stories, that is, foxes let loose in the Roman hippodrome and in the Samson stories, are nearly "impossible to establish."[614]

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[612] Jiménez, *Babylonian Disputation Poems*, 39–47. For more on the relationship between textual knowledge and divine and/or human wisdom in the ancient Near East, see Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 205–32; Van de Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*; Noegel, "'Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign'"; and George, "Access to Religious Knowledge."

[613] Moore, *Judges*, 341–42; Margalith, "Samson's Foxes"; Groß, Richter, 703–04; Niditch, *Judges*, 158–59; and Spronk, *Judges*, 427.

The foxes are not the only unique part of the story, but also the torches (לפיד), which are only mentioned eleven other times in the Bible (Gen 15:7; Exod 20:18; Judg 7:16, 20; Job 12:15; 41:19; Isa 62:1; Ezek 1:13; Dan 10:16; Nah 2:4; Zech 12:6). Torches play a central role in the Gideon stories, for example, in which Gideon leads his small army of three hundred Israelites against the much larger Midianite army in the middle of the night holding only trumpets and torches inside of jars (Judg 7). In the largely folkloric fashion of the Gideon and Samson stories, there are three-hundred unusual weapons (i.e., torches inside of jars, torches attached to fox tails) used by the Israelite underdogs (i.e., Gideon, Samson) against their seemingly superior enemies (i.e., Midianites, Philistines).[615] Torches are used in a symbolic way in Zech 12:6, a text that also shares features with the Samson stories, as fiery torches are envisioned devouring the sheaves of Judah's surrounding inhabitants. In Judg 15:4, Samson puts the torches "in the middle" (בתוך) of each pair of fox tails. Elsewhere, in a covenant ceremony between Abram and Yhwh, a "torch" (לפיד) passes through two rows of animals slaughtered "in the middle" (בתוך) of their bodies. In Josh 8:22, the city of Ai and all its inhabitants are destroyed by fire after the men of the city (cf. Judg 14:18) are captured "in the middle" (בתוך) of Joshua's army (Josh 8:18–22). The use of the verb פנה ("to turn") to describe, at least implicitly, how Samson tied the foxes' tails together, is made explicit by the Greek translators who use the verb δέω ("to tie, bind") at the end of the verse in the LXX[B]. The word for "tail, end, stump" (זנב) only gets used eleven times in the Bible, a few of which

[614] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 174–76.

[615] Kelly J. Murphy, "'A Sword for YHWH and for Gideon!'" The Representation of War in Judges 7:16–22," in *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 65–82.

have interesting parallels with the Samson stories. Thus, for example, in the book of Exodus, Moses catches a supernatural snake by its tail (Exod 4:4), and in a oracle to the king of Judah (Ahaz), the prophet Isaiah describes the rebellious kings of Aram (Rezin) and Israel (Pekah) as "these two tails of smoking firebrands" (Isa 7:4).[616] Each of these texts echo language and themes in the Samson stories and fall within the divine and heroic warrior traditions found throughout the Bible, whether it is the fire consuming the city of Ai and its inhabitants caught in the middle of a military ambush led by Joshua and Yhwh, or the torches in Gideon and Yhwh's army of three hundred men terrorizing the Midianites, or the flaming appearance of tails and torches in the prophetic oracles of Isaiah and Zechariah describing the protection of Judah and Jerusalem from their enemies by Yhwh.[617]

What, then, do Samson's foxes destroy? According to the narrator, after the fire (אש) burns (בער) the torches, it consumes (בער) the "standing grain" (קמה), "stacked grain" (גדיש), "vineyard" (כרם), and "olive tree" (זית) of the Philistines in Timnah. The Greek authors of the LXX[A] have the passage "and what had been previously harvested" (καὶ τὰ προτεθερισμένα), likely to clarify the difference in the Hebrew between the unharvested "standing grain" (קמה) versus the harvested "stacked grain" (גדיש). The final part of the verse (Judg 15:5) often causes trouble for interpreters. The MT literally reads: "and he burned from stacked grain to standing grain, and as far as a vineyard, an olive

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[616] There are numerous intertextual connections between the Samson stories and Isaiah's oracle to King Ahaz, for example, Isaiah's oracle speaks of Assyria (7:17, 18, 20), bees (v. 18), honey (vv. 15, 21), razors (v. 20), the birth of a savior child (v. 14), and vines (v. 23).

[617] Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, HSM 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Mobley, *Empty Men*; Levine, "Religion in the Heroic Spirit"; Smith, *Poetic Heroes*; and Johnson, "'Spirit of Yhwh.'"

tree" (וַיַּבְעֵר מִגָּדִישׁ וְעַד־קָמָה וְעַד־כֶּרֶם זָיִת). Following LXX, BHS proposes to insert another

וְעַד at the end of the verse, thereby reading "and as far as a vineyard and an olive tree."

The singular rather than plural form of כרם and זית asks whether the authors are referring

to a vineyard or vineyards or an olive tree or olive trees. As Richard Nelson remarks, if

the two words are translated as a construct, then it would read "groves of olives" (e.g.,

Auld, Knauf, Spronk), but if as an ellipsis, then it would read "as far as the vineyards, the

olive groves" (e.g., Niditch).[618] Following David Noel Freedman, some argue that the ם

in כרם serves double duty and functions as the מן before זית, forming a chiastic structure

in the final clause (ויבער מגדיש ועד־קמה ועד־כרם זית); thus reading, for example, "and

burned everything, both stacked grain and standing grain, vineyards and olive orchards

alike" (Boling), or "He burned things up, from stacked grain to standing grain, and from

vineyard to olive grove" (Nelson).[619] The ellipsis seems correct, since the formation of

four elements in succession such as the absolutes listed here (i.e., standing grain, stacked

grain, vineyards, and olive groves) is an indication of totality in the Bible and ancient

Near East.

The combination of the vineyard(s) and olive tree(s) are found throughout the

Bible (Exod 23:11; Josh 24:13; 1 Sam 8:14; 2 Kgs 5:26; 18:32; Neh 5:11; 9:25; Amos

4:9), both in their singular and plural forms. Similarly, in the book of Judges, the authors

describe the agricultural destruction of Israel by the Midianites (Judg 6:4), as well as

Israel's metaphorical devastation in Jotham's parable that includes the "olive tree" (Judg

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[618] Nelson, *Judges*, 254. Auld, *Joshua, Judges*, 212; Knauf, *Richter*, 133, 138; Spronk, *Judges*, 427–28; and Niditch, *Judges*, 149.

[619] David Noel Freedman, "A Note on Judges 15,5," *Biblica* 52 (1971): 535; Boling, Judges, 234–35; Soggin, *Judges*, 246; and Nelson, *Judges*, 253–54.

9:8–9) and "vine" (Judg 9:12–13) among other arboreal figures, such as the "fig" (Judg 9:10–11) and "bramble" (Judg 9:14–15), in which fire from the bramble (Abimelech) consumes the land and people of Israel (Judg 9:15, 20, 49, 52), including its fields (Judg 9:27, 32, 42–44) and vineyards (Judg 9:27).

As mentioned above, the architecture, faunal remains, pottery, and material culture at Timnah not only reflect a mixed occupancy and entangled culture of Canaanites, Philistines, Israelites, and Judahites, but the site has easy access to water and fertile soil, making it an ideal location for trade to harvest the land for olive oil, wine, and wheat.[620] In other words, the fiery destruction of the "standing grain" (קמה), "stacked grain" (גדיש), "vineyards" (כרם), and "olive trees" (זית) of the Philistines in Timnah was a devastating and vengeful blow by Samson. Thus, both the archaeological and textual evidence support the literary features imagined in the story, in which Samson's devious attack against the Philistines destroyed their economic and social pride.

In lieu of their destroyed crops and ruined fields, the Philistines immediately retaliate and make good on their threat to burn the Timnite woman and her father alive (Judg 14:15) after discovering the culprit behind this disastrous albeit clever attack. In a quick succession of Qal imperfect and perfect verbs, the Philistines proceed then to act as judge, jury, and executioner. Thus, they begin by asking who committed the act, to which those present—it is not indicated who "they" are—duly answer: "Samson, son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife, and he gave her to his companion" (Judg 15:6). The use of חתן ("bridegroom" or "son-in-law") with התמני ("the Timnite") in the masculine confirms Samson did in fact marry the Timnite woman, since she is no longer

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[620] Mazar and Panitz-Cohen, *Timnah (Tel Batash) III*, 158–61, 262–63, 295–310.

simply his "woman" (אשה) and he her "bridegroom" (חתן). The Greek translations, however, differ with each other on this reading, since the LXX[A] reads "the son-in-law of the Thamnathite" (ὁ γαμβρὸς τοῦ Θαμναθαίου)" while the LXX[B] reads "the groom of the Thamni" (ὁ νυμφίος τοῦ Θαμνί). It is here that we learn that it was Samson's father-in-law who gave his daughter to Samson's "companion" (מרע), something left unsaid at the end of the previous chapter (Judg 14:20). As noted above, Samson's supposed companion was described there with the piel perfect of רעה, a *hapax legomenon* that doubtfully was a choice by the authors to emphasize his friendliness—something seemingly assumed by all commentators and translators—but rather a cutting remark about the villainous Philistine who "grazed" (רעה) the Timnite woman, that is, "fondled" her (Judg 14:20; 15:2), especially after Samson's accusation against the Philistines who "ploughed" his "heifer" (Judg 14:18). Upon learning that it was Samson who destroyed their fields, the response by the Philistines is swift and fatal, resulting in them burning (שרף) the Timnite woman and her father alive. Unlike the MT and LXX[B], the LXX[A] includes "[and] her father's house" (τὴν οἰκίαν τοῦ πατρὸς), likely to align with the same line spoken earlier by the Philistines in Judg 14:15. The act of burning something or someone is of course common in the Bible, seen for instance in the previous verse. Yet, the use of שרף ("to burn") has more violent connotations than בער ("to burn, consume"), as it is frequently used to describe burning cities, human beings, and idolatrous objects, very often in war texts (cf. Akk. *šarāpu*).[621] In the DH, for example, it is used to describe burning cities to the ground (Deut 13:16; Josh 6:24; 8:28; 11:11, 13; Judg 18:27; 1 Sam 30:1, 3, 14; 1 Kgs 9:16; 2 Kgs 25:9), incinerating idols (Deut 7:5, 25; 9:21; 12:3; 1 Kgs 15:13; 2 Kgs 10:26;

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[621] U. Rütersworden, "שָׂרַף *śārap*," *TDOT* XIV:218–28. CAD Š/2, 250–53 [esp. 251–52].

23:4, 6, 11, 15, 16), executing men and women in fire (Josh 7:15, 25; Judg 12:1; 2 Sam

23:7; 1 Kgs 16:18), and sacrificing children in flames (Deut 12:31; 2 Kgs 17:31; Jer 7:31;

19:5). In two other biblical texts, it is used to describe burning a daughter (Lev 21:9) or

daughter-in-law (Gen 38:24) alive, as it is here in the Samson stories (cf. Judg 11:29–40).

Therefore, with the murder of Samson's wife and her family, the acts of vengeance

between Samson and the Philistines, each of which revolves around fire, reach a boiling

point.

Indeed, Samson's response to the Philistines' treacherous act results in his

declaration of vengeance upon them in the form of an oath.[622] Thus, Samson says to the

Philistines: "If you will act like this, then only when I myself have taken vengeance upon

you will I cease" (Judg 15:7). Many scholars argue that the use of נקם ("to avenge") by

the authors is legally intended to show how Samson is entitled to blood vengeance for the

Philistines' murderous act against his lawful wife; thus, his promise to cease (חדל) after

he justly fulfills his revenge.[623] The root *nqm* is used forty-nine times in the Bible, not

only to describe acts of vengeance between human beings (Gen 4:15, 24; Lev 19:18; Judg

16:28; Jer 20:10; Ps 8:2; 44:16; Prov 6:34; Lam 3:60), but also between Yhwh and those

who oppose Israel and Judah, including Assyria (Nah 1:2), Babylon (Jer 50:15), and

Philistia (Ezek 25:15–17).[624] The use of the verb נקם in the Niphal has the reflexive

meaning of avenging oneself, which is exactly what Samson does here and in every other

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[622] Niditch, *Judges*, 153.

[623] Boling, Judges, 235; Butler, *Judges*, 341; and Groß, *Richter*, 705. See, also, Wayne T. Pitard, "Amarna *ekēmu* and Hebrew *naqām*," *MAARAV* 3 (1982): 5–25.

[624] Edward Lipiński, "נָקַם *nāqam*," *TDOT* X:1–9. The only extant text in Akkadian known to use *niqmu* in the sense of revenge comes from an unpublished Mari letter that reads: "he who was entitled to revenge against him killed him" (*bēl niqmīšu idūkšu*). CAD N/2, 251.

single-handed attack against the Philistines. As Wayne Pitard notes, "*nqm* in all such contexts is not pejorative, but rather connotes the bringing about of just punishment for the guilty and compensation for the victim; and also 'to take revenge' (verb) and 'revenge' (noun), in cases of evil intent by the subject."[625] The verb חדל ("to cease") is often used in violent contexts as well, such as when ceasing the attack (Jer 51:30) or pursuit (1 Sam 23:13) of an enemy and when using divination to discern from God or the Gods whether to go into battle (Judg 20:28; 1 Kgs 22:6, 15). Hence, in Judg 15:7, Samson's declaration to limit his acts of vengeance appears honorable. Yet, this oath does not line up with Samson's actions thus far in the story, and they may in fact be a form of irony employed by the authors writing one thing but meaning entirely another.[626] Therefore, rather than clearly exercising *lex talionis*, what biblical authors essentially describe as "an eye for an eye," that is, fair recompense for acts of wrongdoing, Samson ups the ante by outweighing the punishment for each crime committed against him. For example, when Samson loses his contest (חידה) with the Philistine companions and is forced to pay his wager of thirty festal and linen garments (Judg 14:12, 18), he slays thirty innocent Philistines in Ashkelon, who have nothing to do with his wedding in Timnah, and steals their armor to pay off his debts (Judg 14:19); or when Samson discovers that his wife has been given away to one of his companions by her father, he does not punish the father, but instead destroys the fields and local economy of the Philistines in Timnah (Judg 15:1–5). These uneven acts of retribution for offences

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[625] Pitard, "Amarna *ekēmu* and Hebrew *naqām*," 58.

[626] The use of irony is prevalent throughout the Samson stories and will be explored in detail below in Chapter Four when examining the Samson and Delilah stories. For more, see Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, 109–40; and Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, ISBL (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2009).

perpetrated against Samson are what Helen Paynter describes as "an escalating form of mimesis" between Israel and Philistia that is narrated in the form of "ever-increasing, ever-widening acts of vengeance" by Samson.[627] It should be remembered, though, that within the world of the Samson stories, Samson's heroic feats against the archenemies of Israel are portrayed on an epic scale and are therefore not meant to describe historical reality; instead, they are, in part, an expression of resistance to those in power during the time of their composition and reception. In other words, the character of Samson is a vehicle through which the Israelite and Judahite audiences hearing and reading his stories can imagine themselves also defying the dominant forces of the day, that is, the Neo-Assyrian empire, and, perhaps, to a certain extent, even the Philistines during that time.

Samson makes good on his promise to avenge his wife and her family who were burned alive by the Philistines with a mighty attack before retreating into the wilderness (Judg 15:8). The authors once again cleverly employ wordplay to narrate how Samson both punishes and humiliates his enemies, something that likely proved entertaining, and perhaps even encouraging, for the earliest hearers and readers of the story. The text reads as follows: "And he struck them, leg upon loin, a great blow! Then he went down and dwelled in the cleft of the Rock of Etam" (Judg 15:8). There are only three verbs used in this verse, two of which appear numerous times in the core Samson stories, which are נכה "to strike" (Judg 14:19; 15:8, 15–16) and ירד "to go down" (Judg 14:1, 5, 7, 10, 19; 15:8, 11–12). As noted above, the verb נכה is often used to describe a deadly attack upon Philistines, sometimes by the hands of a single figure, such as Shamgar (Judg 3:31), Samson (Judg 14:19; 15:8, 15–16), David (1 Sam 17:50), Eleazar (2 Sam 23:10), or

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[627] Paynter, "'Revenge'," 133, 139. See, also, Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24.

207

Shammah (2 Sam 23:12), or a military attack, such as those led by Samuel (1 Sam 7:11),

Saul (1 Sam 13:4; 14:31; 18:7), Jonathan (1 Sam 13:3), or David (1 Sam 18:7; 27; 19:8,

23:2, 5; 2 Sam 5:20, 24–25; 8:1; 21:17–21).[628] Therefore, like Israel's great warriors and

warrior kings of old, Samson attacks (נכה) the Philistines on multiple occasions, whether

in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19), Timnah (Judg 15:8), Lehi (Judg 15:15), or Gaza (Judg 16:30),

often humiliating them in the process.[629]

Scholars debate the possible meaning(s) of the idiom (שׁוק על־ירך) in the middle of

Judg 15:8. One of the earliest readings by a biblical critic was that it described a

wrestling move, something proposed in the early eighteenth century by the Swiss

theologian, Johannes Clericus, also known as Jean Le Clerc, which was then published by

Gottlieb Ludwig Studer (1835), Abram Smythe Palmer (1913), and Charles F. Burney

(1918).[630] Boling playfully suggested that the idiom might imply a pile of dead Philistines

(lit. "legs upon thighs"), something shared most recently by Nelson, and supported in the

story by the following skirmish, where Samson kills one thousand Philistines (Judg

15:15–16).[631] It is unlikely, however, the phrase describes a wrestling move as such,

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[628] Conrad, "נָכָה *nkh*."

[629] As Conrad notes, the verb נָכָה often "is a means of humiliating subjects or disagreeable individuals or breaking their resistance (Ex. 2:11; 5:14, 16 [hophal]; 21:26; 26:16; Isa. 50:6; Jer. 20:2; 37:15). […] Much more frequently, however, *nkh* denotes the killing of several opponents in a single action or in a brief period of time. A small group or a multitude may be killed in open combat (Josh. 7:5; Jgs. 3:31; 15:8, 15; 20:31; 1 S. 14:14; 18:27; by an individual without military equipment: Jgs. 3:31; 15:15f.; 15:8 probably refers to killing also), the major part of an army in a pitched battle (e.g., 2 S. 8:5; 10:18; cf. Jer. 18:21 [Hophal]), or even an entire host (Jgs. 3:29; cf. Jer. 37:10)." Conrad, 417–19.

For more on the heroic traditions underlying these passages, see Niditch, "*Samson as Culture Hero*"; Mobley, *Empty Men*, 196–207; and Smith, *Poetic Heroes*, 314–22.

[630] Studer, *Buch der Richter*, 334; Palmer, *Samson Saga*, 225; and Burney, *Book of Judges*, 370. See, also, Butler, *Judges*, 341; and Webb, *Book of Judges*, 380.

since that type of wrestling is not known to have existed in ancient Israel.[632] On the one

hand, the idiom of course describes some kind of tactical maneuver Samson uses to

overpower the Philistines as he strikes a "great blow" (מכה גדולה) against them—a phrase

almost entirely used in the DH (e.g., Josh 10:10, 20; 11:33; Judg 11:33; 15:8; 1 Sam 6:19;

19:8; 23:5; 1 Kgs 20:21).[633] On the other hand, a likely second meaning is that Samson

delt an extraordinarily damaging and humiliating blow to the Philistines' loins (ירך) with

his leg (שוק), thereby making them impotent—a punishment perhaps considered even

worse than death.[634] This reading nicely aligns with the sexual innuendos exhibited

hitherto in Samson's revelry with the Philistines from Timnah following his marriage to

one of their own.[635] Furthermore, each of these more risqué elements in the text was

likely not only to excite laughter from the earliest hearers and readers, but a way to

reinforce one of the underlying themes in the Samson stories and the rest of the DH,

which is the risk that intermarriage poses for Israel, since it inevitably leads to the

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[631] Thus, Boling reads "a tangle of legs and thighs (*Judges*, 235) and Nelson "the random piling up of corpses" (*Judges*, 254).

[632] The only explicit example of wrestling in the Bible is the story of Jacob wrestling (אבק) a divine figure all night (Gen 32:22–32). While Jacob does indeed "wrestle" (אבק)—lit. "get dusty"—with this mysterious figure, it is not wrestling in the sense of a technical, combat sport as practiced in ancient Greece and other cultures, but rather as a mythical rite of passage. For more, see Michael Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[633] For this more general reading of the phrase, see Budde, *Buch der Richter*, 103; Moore, *Judges*, 342–43; Lagrange, *Livre des Juges*, 240; Soggin, *Judges*, 246; and Groß, *Richter*, 705.

[634] The use of the word שוק ("leg") in the Bible describes the area of the human leg from the knee downward (e.g., Deut 28:35; Judg 15:8; Isa 47:2; Ps 147:10; Prov 26:7; Song 5:15). Whereas the use of the word ירך describes the "thighs" (Gen 24:2, 9; 32:25, 31–32; 47:29; Exod 32:27; Num 5:21–22, 27; Judg 3:16; Ps 45:3; Song 3:8; 7:1; Jer 31:19; Ezek 21:12; 24:4) or "loins" (Gen 46:26; Exod 1:5; 28:42; Judg 8:30; 15:8) of an animal or person, as well as a side of the altar or tabernacle (Exod 40:22, 24; Lev 1:11; Num 3:29, 35; 2 Kgs 16:14), or the shaft of an inanimate object (Exod 25:31; 37:17; Num 8:4).

[635] Butler translates ירך as "groin" (*Judges*, 308, 341) and Spronk also notes what he calls the "sexual overtones" in Samson's idiom (*Judges*, 430).

idolatrous worship of foreign gods and thus the denigration of the covenant between

Yhwh and Israel (cf. Deut 7:1–6; Judg 2:11–3:6).[636] As Schneider aptly puts it:

> The book of Judges as a whole treats intermarriage between Israelites and anyone else as a destructive force for the future of the nation. The complications and different or unpleasant practices expressed by the Philistines in this episode [between Samson and the Timnite woman] should not be read as reflecting Israelite practice but problems concerning the Philistines. What better way to present the problems of intermarriage than with a story where different cultural practices collide resulting in disaster for both parties.[637]

Following Samson's damaging and demeaning attack upon the Philistines, "he

went down and dwelled in the cleft of the Rock of Etam." As demonstrated above, the

verb ירד fits into the literary framework of the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15) as

Samson frequently travels downward (ירד) and upward (עלה) between Israelite and

Philistine territory throughout the Shephelah (Judg 14:1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 19; 15:6, 8–13).[638]

Thus, going down (ירד) from Timnah to "the Rock of Etam" (סלע עיטם) is suggestive,

although scholars are uncertain where the Rock of Etam was located. As shown above,

the Samson stories take place in a variety of ancient Israelite, Judahite, and Philistine

cities and towns, including Lehi (Judg 15:9, 14, 19), which in the story appears to be near

the Rock of Etam (Judg 15:11). The location of the other sites in this part of the story,

Ramath-Lehi (Judg 15:17) and En-Hakkore (Judg 15:19), are also unknown and they

feature two *hapax legomena*, "Ramath-Lehi (רמת לחי) and "En-Hakkore" (עין הקורא),

which, as explored below, are types of wordplay corresponding to Samson's battle

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[636] Knoppers, "Sex, Religion, and Politics"; and Crowell, "Good Girl, Bad Girl."

[637] Schneider, *Judges*, 213.

[638] For the possible meaning of this literary theme, see Weitzman, "Samson Story"; idem, "Crossing the Border"; Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between"; and Thomas, "Samson Went Down."

against the Philistines and divine recovery at Lehi (Judg 15:14–19). According to the

book of Chronicles, Etam is the name of a descendent of Judah (1 Chr 4:3), a village

listed in the genealogy of Simeon (1 Chr 4:32), and one of the many Judean cities

fortified during the reign of King Rehoboam (2 Chr 11:5–12).[639] Etam is also among the

Judean towns surrounding Bethlehem in the additional district listed in the Greek version

of the book of Joshua (LXX Josh 15:59α).[640] Some scholars identify Etam with the site of

'Ain 'Aṭān, but most situate it in the vicinity of Khirbet el-Ḫōḫ, which is located several

kilometers southwest of Bethlehem.[641] Erasmus Gass distinguishes the Etam in Judah

from the cleft of the Rock of Etam in the Samson stories, and places the latter at *'Irāq*

Isma'īn, a vertical cliff in the *Wādī Isma'īn* of the northern Shephelah, which provides a

much more fitting location for Samson's retreat within the story.[642] Gass also notes how

two cisterns provided the water supply to *'Irāq Isma'īn* from the nearby *Wādī Isma'īn*, a

continuation of *Wādī eṣ-Ṣarār*, something that works well with the LXX^A reading, as

Samson was staying "by the wadi in the cave of Etam" (παρὰ τῷ χειμάρρῳ ἐν τῷ

σπηλαίῳ Ηταμ).[643] It is also likely that the authors are engaging in wordplay again with

their unique inclusion of the "cleft of the Rock of Etam" (סעיף סלע עיטם) in the story, since

the vertical cliffs Samson is hiding among is probably a pun describing the views he has

like a "bird of prey" (עיט) keeping an eye upon the approaching Philistines below from

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[639] For more, see Knoppers, *I Chronicles 1–9*, 344; and Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, 666–668.

[640] Rösel, *Joshua*, 262.

[641] Knoppers, *I Chronicles*, 344; and Rösel, *Joshua*, 262.

[642] For more, see Gass, "Simson und die Philister," 377–78; and Erasmus Gass and Boaz Zissu, "The Monastery of Samson up the Rock of Etham in the Byzantine Period," *ZDPV* 121 (2005): 168–83.

[643] Gass, "Simson und die Philister," 377.

the "cleft" or "branch" (סעיף) above (Judg 15:8, 11).[644] A nearby Judean site in the

northern Shephelah, Azekah, which rests upon a mountaintop, was similarly described by

Sennacherib in one of his tablets discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal. Thus, after

Sennacherib and his army destroys Azekah in 701 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian king describes

the site as follows: "[like the nest of the eagle] located on a mountain ridge, like pointed

iron daggers without number reaching high to heaven."[645]

Regardless, either Etam, whether the one in the northern Shephelah or the one

southwest of Bethlehem, can be confidently located in Judah. Moreover, whichever

textual tradition the city or village is derived from or included among, its geographical

orientation fulfills both historical and theological functions for Judah, something central

to the rest of the story when the territory of Judah is explicitly included (Judg 15:9) and

the "men of Judah" (איש יהודה) arrive on the scene (Judg 15:10–11).[646] In other words, the

Samson stories return where the savior stories begin in the book of Judges, which is with

the tribe of Judah (Judg 3:9–11).

Many redaction critics identify Judg 15:8 as the original ending to the core

Samson stories (Judg 14:1–15:8) and assign Judg 15:9–20, along with the narrative

obtrusion at the beginning of the stories (Judg 14:4) and the appearances of the "spirit of

Yhwh" throughout (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), as etiological (Judg 15:17, 19) and

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[644] The birds of prey (עיט) are only mentioned a handful of times in the Bible, such as the covenant between Abram and God (Gen 15:11), Job's search for wisdom (Job 28:7), and the prophets' metaphorical description of the enemies of Judah (Isa 18:6; 46:11; Jer 12:9; Ezek 39:4).

[645] Nadav Na'aman, "Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR* 214 (1974): 25–39.

[646] Curtis, "Joshua: Historical Mapping."

Deuteronomistic (Judg 15:20) additions to the text.[647] Despite these likely, earlier scribal

revisions, the first Deuteronomistic ending (Judg 15:20) encapsulates all of the core

Samson stories (Judg 14–15) before the major additions of Judg 16 and Judg 13, which

are also placed within a Deuteronomistic framework (Judg 13:1; 16:31). At the narrative

level, the final battle between the Philistines from Timnah and Samson functions as the

dénouement of the previous stories in which Samson's failed marriage to the Timnite

woman and her kinfolk goes horribly awry and leads to a violent exchange in a biblical

War of the Roses. Therefore, in addition to an etiology of two obscure locations, Ramath-

Lehi (Judg 15:17) and En-Hakkore (Judg 15:19), the finale of the stories in Judg 15:9–19

provides a fitting ending to the heroic albeit humorous feats achieved by Samson against

the archenemies of Israel.

The next scene initiates the final confrontation between Samson and the

Philistines in these core stories. Yet, something unique is featured here, which is the

introduction of Judah and the Judahites into the story, raising an interesting question

about the nature of Samson's identity: to whom does Samson belong? If Judg 13 and 16

are additions to the Samson stories, and there is no affiliation of Samson with the tribe of

Dan or the Israelites in Judg 14–15, other than likely Deuteronomistic additions (Judg

14:4; 15:20), but only with Judah and territories on its borders, then it stands to reason

that Samson was more likely a Judahite character before he was known to be a שפט over

all Israel (Judg 15:20; 16:31) and from the clan of Dan (Judg 13:2; 16:31). The

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[647] See, for example, Gese, "ältere Simsonüberlieferung"; Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam"; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 190–332; Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 41–44; Kratz, *Composition*, 205; Groß, *Richter*, 89–90, 657–60; Knauf, *Richter*, 16–17, 23–25; and Paris, "Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4."

motivation to transform Samson from a Judahite to an Israelite (Judg 15:20; 16:31) and

then a Danite character (Judg 13:2) make sense given earlier biblical traditions in the

book of Joshua that locate Dan in the south, on the border of Judah, and associate it with

Judahite towns, such as Zorah and Eshtaol (Josh 15:13; 21:16; cf. Josh 19:40–48), which

are the hometowns of Samson and his family (Judg 13:25; 16:31).[648] The reason for this

transformation also makes sense within the initial framework of the DH, which most

likely took shape in the seventh century BCE after the destruction of Israel and survival

of Judah from the Neo-Assyrian onslaughts at the end of the eighth century BCE.[649] It is

within those contexts that Deuteronomistic scribes likely portrayed the leaders of Israel

and Judah as reflecting the complicated salvation history of their people, with the judges

anticipating, endorsing, and critiquing later monarchic rulers, especially the northern

kings of Israel, with whom they shared similar responsibilities.[650] With the downfall of

Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, what Martin

Noth called Israel's "historical catastrophes," the form and function of the DH evolved

from a salvation history into a tragic history.[651] This evolution of the DH is reflected in

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[648] For more on Dan in the book of Joshua, see Bartusch, *Understanding Dan*, 80–108.

[649] Campbell and O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History*; Nelson, "Double Redaction"; Römer, *So-Called*; and Knoppers, "History as Confession?"; idem, "History and Historiography"; and idem, "From Israel to Judah." Although he argues that the "overall framework" of the Deuteronom(ist)ic History took shape in the exilic period, Raymond Person acknowledges that its roots and sources were preexilic (Person, Jr., *Deuteronomic School*, 25–29).

[650] Brettler, "Book of Judges," 416–18; Becker, "Place of the Book of Judges," 349–51; Römer, *So-Called*, 137–38; Focken, "Structure of Offices"; and Müller, "Redactional Framework," 129–30, 34.

[651] This evolution of perspectives in the DH was famously argued by Frank Moore Cross, who suggested an original preexilic edition of the DH centered around the successful reign of King Josiah in

Judah during the seventh century BCE. For more on this theory and competing ones for the form and function of the DH, see Römer, "So-Called Deuteronomistic History."

the Samson stories when the heroic warrior in conflict with Israel's enemies (Judg 14–15) transforms into a tragic figure foreshadowing the downfall of Judah (Judg 16).[652]

The authors set the scene as follows: "And the Philistines went up and encamped in Judah and spread themselves out by Lehi" (Judg 15:9). The Philistines travel north to meet Samson (Judg 15:6, 10; 16:5, 8), continuing the downward and upward literary pattern set between Samson and the Philistines in the text. The narrator describes how "the Philistines encamped in Judah" (פלשתים ויחנו ביהודה), which, as noted above, is the first and only time in the Samson stories that Judah is mentioned. The authors proceed to use the verbs חנה ("to decline, bend down, encamp") and נטש ("to leave, forsake, permit"), which are common in biblical war texts and prepare the audience for the ensuing battle. The verb חנה is used in the DH when describing the gathering of Philistine armies (1 Sam 4:1; 13:16; 2 Sam 23:23). The authors use the verb נטש in the Niphal here, meaning "to spread themselves out," which is also applied to Philistine armies (Judg 15:8; 1 Sam 4:2; 30:16; 2 Sam 5:18, 22). It is also used metaphorically by the prophets to describe how the vineyards of drunken Moabites once *spread out* across the land and sea (Isa 16:8), how Israel's enemies cannot support themselves just as weak ropes cannot *spread out* and support a ship's mast (Isa 33:23), and how the virgin Israel has fallen and lies *spread out* over the land before her enemies (Amos 5:2). Therefore, whether in its literal or metaphorical sense, the verb נטש in the Niphal involves the encroaching enemies of Israel.

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[652] Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists."

The precise location of Lehi is unknown, although several commentators argue that it was just west of Beth-Shemesh.[653] After a review of the archaeological evidence, biblical texts, and history of scholarship, Chris McKinny has proposed that Lehi was a regional term and most likely situated "between the eastern Shephelah and the hills west of Bethlehem, and narrowly localized to the upper section of the Valley Rephaim south of modern Jerusalem."[654] According to the MT, "Lehi" (לֶחִי) is only mentioned in the Samson stories (Judg 15:9, 14, 19), however, it is almost certainly included in the stories of David's mighty men as well, which contains a text about the gathering together of Philistines "at Lehi" rather than "into a troop" (2 Sam 23:11).[655] The name לחי means "jawbone" and it anticipates the alliteration of that word in Samson's infamous attack upon the Philistines with a fresh jawbone of an ass (Judg 15:15–17) as well as the etiology of the victorious placename "Jawbone Hill" (Judg 15:17) near the end of the story. Yet, the anatomical description of the site may also reveal something deeper about the meaning of its name, which is drawn from its Akkadian cognate *lētu* ("cheek, side").[656] Thus, in addition to being a clever etiology for the placename, Ramath-Lehi, whose mountainous region and steep cliffs possibly described a location resembling a jawbone, the word Lehi might indicate the Judean boundary that the Philistines spread

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[653] Boling, *Judges*, 238; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 529; and Gass, "Simson und die Philister," 378–79.

[654] Chris McKinny, "'Shall I die of thirst?' The Location of Biblical Lehi, En-hakkore, and Ramath-lehi," *Archaeology and Text* 2 (2018): 64.

[655] As McCarter notes: "MT *lḥyh* is to be read *leḥyāh* with LXX[LM] *epi siagona* and OL *ad maxillam* (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 7.310)." McCarter, *II Samuel*, 490.

[656] CAD L 148–51.

out against when approaching the men of Judah for the first time in the story.[657] As Meir

Lubetski explains:

> The Akkadian turns of speech in which the term *lītu* occurs show that metaphorically the cheek or the lower jawbone are employed for border or limit or circumference. [...] It also stands to reason that the deployment of Philistine troops is along the entire border rather than in a specific location. The proposal gains cogency from the use of the verb *wayyinnāṭĕšû* (Judg 15:9) "they were deployed." The only other employment of the verb *nṭš* in the Niphal in warfare occurs in 2 Sam 5:18, 22 where the Philistines deploy troops over a wide geographical region to seize David, just as in the present case they spread out their soldiers to capture Samson. There and here *nṭš* is characteristic of army deployment for searching a specific foe (i.e., David and Samson) rather than for a siege of a particular location. Furthermore, the Masoretic pointing of the word *balleḥî* (Judg 15:9, 19) definitely implies a common noun rather than a proper noun of a place. Thus, enigmatic *leḥî* embraces an old meaning already embedded in its Akkadian precursor *lītu*.[658]

The question posed by the men of Judah to the Philistines encamped upon their

border and the answers the Philistines provide make it clear what their intentions are for

Samson. Hence, the men of Judah ask the Philistines: "'Why have you come up against

us?' And they answered, 'We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he has done

to us'" (Judg 15:10). The verb אסר ("to tie, bind, imprison") is used five times (Judg

15:10, 12, 13) and the noun אסור ("a band, bond") once (Judg 15:14) in this chapter, and

the verb is used another ten times in the following chapter with Samson and Delilah

(Judg 16:5–8, 10–13, 21). The Akkadian cognates of אסר are the noun *asīru* ("prisoner of

war, captive foreigner") and the second meaning of the verb *esēru* ("to enclose, to shut in,

to take captive").[659] Perhaps the most famous use of *esēru* relating to the Bible is in its

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[657] Gass, "Simson und die Philister," 379; and Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 183. Boundaries are of course a common theme in the Samson stories. For more, see Weitzman, "Samson Story"; idem, "Crossing the Border"; Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between"; and Thomas, "Samson Went Down."

[658] Meir Lubetski, "Lehi," *ABD* 4:274–75.

description of Sennacherib's campaign against Judah in 701 BCE when the Neo-Assyrian king says: "As for him (Hezekiah), I confined him inside the city of Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage" (*šá-a-šú* GIM MUŠEN *qu-up-pi qé-reb* URU.*ur-sa-li-im-mu* URU LUGAL-*ti-šú e-sír-šú*).[660] The same sense of the word אסר appears in the Bible to describe the capture of the Israelite king, Hoshea, by the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V, around 725 BCE, after Hoshea conspired with the king of Egypt, rebelled against Shalmaneser, and refused to pay tribute to the Neo-Assyria king (2 Kgs 17:4): "the king of Assyria shut him up and bound him in prison" (ויעצרהו מלך אשור ויאסרהו בית כלא).[661]

Likewise, just as *asīru* is used to describe various captives and prisoners of war by the Assyrians and Babylonians, Samson is bound (cf. *esēru*) by the Philistines and made a captive (cf. *asīru*) in their "house of prisoners" (בבית האסירים) in the following chapter (Judg 16:21; cf. 2 Kgs 25:7).[662] The final line by the Philistines, "to do to him as he has done to us" (Judg 15:10), as well as the similar statement made by Samson in the following verse, "As they did to me, so I have done to them" (Judg 15:11), summarizes the back and forth shared between Samson and the Philistines in their continual struggle to avoid shame and maintain honor through violence.[663]

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[659] CAD A/2 331–32; CAD E 334–36; and *AHw*, 249.

[660] RINAP 3/1 65: Sennacherib 4, 52.

[661] Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 27. CAD E 335. For more on the downfall of Israel by the Neo-Assyrian empire in the 720s BCE, see Shuichi Hasegawa, Christoph Levin, and Karen Radner, eds, *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel*, BZAW 511 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018).

[662] CAD A/2 332; CAD E 334–35; and van der Toorn, "Judges XVI," 249. In response to these comparisons, Andrea Seri concludes that the biblical examples of Samson (Judg 16:21) and Zedekiah (2 Kgs 25:7) are the exceptions rather than the rule regarding the house of prisoners in the ancient Near East. For more, see Andrea Seri, *The House of Prisoners: Slavery and State in Uruk during the Revolt against Samsu-iluna*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

In Judg 15:11–13, the authors narrate the negotiations between the men of Judah and Samson at the cleft of the Rock of Etam before he is bound and brought before the Philistines, who are spread out across the Judean border at Lehi. Apart from the entertaining banter about who did what to whom (Judg 15:10–11), as well as Samson's willingness to allow the men of Judah to take him captive and lead him straight to the Philistines (Judg 15:12–13), there is the underlying question of why the Judahites arrive on the scene at all, especially for a story that most scholars believe is about a Danite (Judg 13:2, 25; 16:31; cf. Josh 19:41) and/or an Israelite (Judg 13:1; 14:4; 15:20; 16:31)—rather than a Judahite—deliverer. Moore, for example, thought the author of the story was a Judean who identified Samson as a Danite and stranger in the land of Judah who took advantage of the situation to "make havoc among the uncircumcised."[664] Soggin, on the other hand, argued that the prompt collaboration of the men of Judah with the Philistines was a slight against Judah, calling them despicable, servile, and submissive, whose "attitude is also criticized implicitly at the end of the episode, when the men of Judah disappear in silence, instead of siding to a man (*sic*.) who could have led them to victory."[665] Schneider, however, argues that the behavior of the Judahites, Philistines, and Samson all reflect the same theme stated at the end of the book, which is that everyone did what was right in their own eyes (Judg 17:6; 21:25); therefore the

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[663] For more on this psychological approach to the text, see Daniel J. Terry, "With the Jawbone of a Donkey: Shame, Violence and Punishment in the Samson Narrative," in *A Cry Instead of Justice – The Bible and Cultures of Violence in Psychological Perspective*, ed. Dereck Daschke and Andrew Kille (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 42–54. For the role that vengeance plays in the worlds behind and inside the text, see Crenshaw, *Samson*, 122–24; Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 199–230; and Paynter, "'Revenge.'"

[664] Moore, *Judges*, 344.

[665] Soggin, *Judges*, 246–50, [esp. 250].

"whole situation descended to a petty game of revenge and mistrust with each acting on what they saw as best for themselves at any particular moment."[666] Niditch has a favorable reading of the men of Judah, interpreting them as "mediators between the Philistines and Samson" since they desire peace over ethnic violence, even when it requires submitting to the dominant forces in control, including the Philistines (cf. Exod 2:14; 5:21).[667] Groß has nothing but scathing remarks about the men of Judah, calling them cowardly and shameful betrayers who are eliminated from the plot by the authors despite the heroic deeds of Samson who defeated their oppressors.[668] Nelson observes how the introduction of the Judahites is essential for this part of the narrative, since Samson needs to be bound voluntarily before miraculously melting off his bonds and slaughtering the Philistines through the spirit of Yhwh (Judg 15:14–15), something only his compatriots in the story, the men of Judah, are able to do.[669]

Thus, while commentators tend to contrast the men of Judah with Samson in the story, none seem to identify Samson as a Judahite himself. This is surprising since most scholars agree the authors of the Samson stories are Judean and acknowledge that nearly all the stories occur in territories inside or bordering Judah, particularly Timnah (Judg 14:1, 2, 5) and Lehi (Judg 15:9, 14, 17, 19)—Ashkelon only appears in one verse and is a short albeit violent jaunt for Samson within that fortified Philistine city (Judg 14:19).

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[666] Schneider, *Judges*, 215.

[667] Niditch, *Judges*, 159.

[668] Groß, *Richter*, 706–07.

[669] Nelson, *Judges*, 257–58. Nelson also notes how "Delilah will devise her own effective workaround to the same storyline quandary (16:6–9, 11–12). Thus, the verb *'sr* (bind) not only unifies this episode (15:10, 12, 13), but also prepares for the following chapter (occurring repeatedly in 16:5–13 and then in v. 21)."

Moreover, no death or damage is suffered by Israelites or Judahites in these stories apart

from Samson himself, who loses his Timnite wife while the Philistines lose much more.

In other words, Samson is a lone Judean warrior who outsmarts and overpowers the

Philistines at every turn, leaving hundreds of dead Philistines in his wake (Judg 14:19;

15:8, 15) and a local economy in ruins (Judg 15:5). Samson is therefore fulfilling the

prophecy given to his mother by the messenger of Yhwh, part of the final addition to the

Samson stories (Judg 13), which is to begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the

Philistines (Judg 13:5), something that is only completed under the leadership of Samuel

(1 Sam 7:7–15). However, before that birth narrative was written and that prophecy given

to Samson's mother (Judg 13:2–25), and prior to the Deuteronomistic framework added

to the text (Judg 13:1; 15:20; 16:31), the oldest Samson stories (Judg 14:1–15:19) told an

epic tale of a fearsome Judean who singlehandedly opposed the Philistines. In addition to

the other judges who delivered the tribes of Israel from their oppressors, Samson and

Othniel bookended these heroic victories with the deliverance of Judah from their foes in

the promised land.

The epic nature of the Samson stories is shown again when it takes three-thousand

men from Judah to approach Samson, emphasizing that even his own kin cautiously

approach him with trepidation. As shown above, the number three has folkloric value and

corresponds to the other intervals of three throughout the Samson stories (Judg 14:11–13,

19; 15:4–5; 16:15, 17).[670] The Judahites' initial question to Samson, "Do you not know

that the Philistines are ruling over us?" echoes the language used in Judg 14:4, a text

identified by many as a Deuteronomistic addition, particularly in its use of משל ("to rule")

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[670] Alter, "Samson without Folklore." See, also, pp. 122–23 above.

to describe who is ruling over whom (cf. Deut 15:6; Josh 15:1–5; Judg 8:22–23; 2 Sam 23:3; 1 Kgs 4:21).[671] The authors' use of משל is likely another example of wordplay, as it has various senses in the Bible, particularly "to speak in parables" (e.g., Ezek 20:49; 24:3) and "to rule" (e.g., Isa 19:4; Zech 6:13), evoking Samson's language game (חידה) earlier in the story (Judg 14:12–19), especially since חידה is often paired with משל (e.g., Ezek 17:2; Hab 2:6; Ps 49:4; 78:2; Prov 1:6). The question by the men of Judah ("what is this you have done to us?") and the response by Samson ("as they did to me so I have done to them") here mirror what was originally asked by the men of Judah ("why have you come up against us?") and answered by the Philistines ("to do to him as he has done to us") in the previous verse (Judg 15:9). Therefore, the verb עשה ("to do") is repeatedly used five times in two verses to clarify or perhaps comically confuse who did what to whom in the narrative. Furthermore, the hearers and readers of the story will soon discover that Samson's earlier vow to "to cease" (חדל) his acts of vengeance upon the Philistines (Judg 15:7) does not last long in this latest confrontation.

The men of Judah inform Samson that they intend to bind him and give him "into the hand of the Philistines" (ביד־פלשתים), a phrase used multiple times in the DH, whether explicitly (e.g., Judg 10:7; 13:1; 15:12; 1 Sam 7:3; 9:16; 12:9; 17:37; 18:25; 28:19; 2 Sam 3:18; 8:1; 19:9) or implicitly (e.g., Judg 15:13, 18; 16:23–24; 1 Sam 12:10), to emphasize the enmity between Israel and Philistia.[672] As shown above, it is unlikely that such a severe and long-lasting conflict existed between ancient Israelites and Philistines, or even

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[671] Paris, "Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4."

[672] For more, see Peter Machinist, "Biblical Traditions: The Philistines and Israelite History," in *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment*, ed. Eliezer D. Oren (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000), 53–83 [esp. 55–56].

if a distinction between them, as well as the Canaanites, was very clear. Instead, a far more entangled culture appears to have been shared between Canaanites, Israelites, Judahites, and Philistines.[673] Nevertheless, as Machinist demonstrates, despite the variety of sources and types of texts that depict the Philistines in the Bible, "[there] is a certain coherent impression of the Philistines as a people centered in coastal Palestine, who remain always different from Israel as a society and culture, and always her foe, and so the object of Yahweh's wrath and righteous punishment, whether in the present or in the future."[674]

The leitmotif of bondage, marked here and elsewhere by the verb אסר ("to bind"), which gets used more in the Samson stories than in any other biblical narrative (Judg 15:10, 12–13; 16:5–8, 10–13, 21), reflects the bondage of Israelite and Judahite leaders by their more powerful, neighboring rulers, the Assyrians (2 Kgs 17:4; 2 Chr 33:11), Egyptians (2 Kgs 23:33), and Babylonians (2 Kgs 25:7; 2 Chr 36:6). Such acts of violent bondage, which intensify in the rest of this story (Judg 15:13–15) and the following one (Judg 16:4–30), align with the rule of the Neo-Assyrian empire and are reflected in the biblical texts emerging from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.[675] As Carly Crouch demonstrates, the "cosmological nexus of war, kingship and order proved central in the legitimation of military activities under the Assyrian kings," which "always occur at the

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[673] Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity*; Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Migration, Hybridization and Resistance"; Maeir and Hitchcock, "Appearance, Formation and Transformation"; Maeir, "Philistine and Israelite Identities"; and idem, "On Defining Israel."

[674] Machinist, "Biblical Traditions," 65.

[675] Carly L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 407 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009). For more on the biblical texts emerging from this period, see Schniedewind, *How the Bible*, 64–90; and Schmid, "Biblical Writings."

location of conquest, reflecting a purposeful use of targeted violence as a means of deterring future resistance to the Assyrian system."[676] This underlying ideology may even explain why Samson says to the men of Judah, "swear to me that you will not attack me" (השבעו לי פן־תפגעון בי אתם), as he would be mocking the very oaths taken by the kings of Judah to their Assyrian lords within their covenant treaties.[677]

Furthermore, in a clever form of paronomasia, the root of the following word in Samson's request for an oath from the men of Judah, פגע ("to meet, encounter, reach"), is seemingly always translated as an act of aggression ("to attack" or "to kill"), especially since the men of Judah agree not to kill (מות) Samson in the next verse (Judg 15:13). Yet, פגע is often used elsewhere to define the borders of tribal territories in the book of Joshua (Josh 16:7; 17:10; 19:11, 22, 26–27, 34). In other words, it describes where one border touches another. The authors of the LXX[A] and LXX[B] specify the meaning of פגע here by using the Greek verbs ἀπαντάω and συναντώ ("to meet").[678] Therefore, it seems that the double-meaning of לחי and פגע in the story counters the claim that the Samson stories are not about borders or border crossings, since the word גבול ("border, boundary, territory")

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[676] Crouch, *War and Ethics*, 191.

[677] The word שָׁבַע ("to swear") is a denominative verb from the word שֶׁבַע (seven), which is used multiples times in the Samson stories, such as the seven-day wedding celebration (Judg 14:12, 17), seven fresh bowstrings to bind Samson (16:7–8), and seven locks of hair cut from Samson's head (Judg 16:13, 19). Seven is a highly symbolic number in the ancient near East (CAD S 203–04, 230–31). For more, see Gotthard G. G. Reinhold and Viktor Golinets, eds., *Die Zahl Sieben im Alten Orient: Studien zur Zahlensymbolik in der Bibel und ihrer altorientalischen Umwelt = The Number Seven in the ancient Near East: Studies on the Numerical Symbolism in the Bible and its ancient Near Eastern Environment* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008).

[678] The authors of the LXX[A] clarify the oath requested by Samson. Thus, LXX[A] reads, "Swear to me not to kill me yourselves and give me up to them, lest you yourselves come against me" (Ὀμόσατέ μοι μὴ ἀποκτεῖναί με ὑμεῖς καὶ παράδοτέ με αὐτοῖς, μήποτε ἀπαντήσητε ὑμεῖς ἐν ἐμοί), whereas the LXX[B] reads, "Swear to me, lest you yourselves gather against me" (ὀμόσατέ μοι μή ποτε συναντήσητε ἐν ἐμοὶ ὑμεῖς). Moreover, in the following verse, the LXX[A] reads, "And they swore" (καὶ ὤμοσαν αὐτῷ), whereas the LXX[B] reads, "And they said" (καὶ εἶπον αὐτῷ).

is not used in the text.[679] Yet, as shown above and below, the authors frequently employ language with multiple meanings to not only create ingenious stories that reflect their literary and rhetorical artistry, but also to express a kind of satire for their hearers and readers living in an empirical shadow. Regarding the fluidity or strictness of borders in the Samson stories and related biblical texts, Leonard-Fleckman examines the ways in which Timnah functions as more than a simple geographical site on a map, but also as a historical and literary location and tradition on the margins of Judah, which is filled with cultural, political, and religious intersections in the world imagined by the biblical authors—something that is readily applied to Lehi in the Samson stories (Judg 15:9–19). Thus, she notes the following considerations when studying the literary form and function of these biblical sites, which are often filled with multiple meanings:

> We can deduce two general tendencies in our literary sources. The first is toward political mapmaking, the careful drawing of boundaries that intersect the earth's surface as part of a sweeping vision of land claims. The second tendency is toward the social imaginary, the creation of messy plotlines through human actors and activity that transform places into particular social landscapes. […] In these diverse and compositionally complex representations, Timnah—a geographical place, a social landscape, and perhaps a symbolic name—is woven into broader literary tapestries that fashion ancient Israel and Judah in relation to the people and powers around them. These often conflicting textual records are not easily translatable into pottery styles and faunal remains, for even if they were to paint a consistent portrait, representation does not simply slide into reality, especially when it comes to defining who people really were at a particular time and in relation to political power [680]

Accordingly, the authors use repetition and the infinitive absolute twice in this verse to emphasize Samson's bondage, "we will surely bind you" (אסר נאסרך), and

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[679] Cf. Weitzman, "Samson Story"; idem, "Crossing the Border"; Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between"; and Thomas, "Samson Went Down."

[680] Leonard-Fleckman, "Betwixt and Between," 84.

protection from death, "but we will surely not kill you (והמת לא נמיתך), by the men of

Judah (Judg 15:13). Moreover, נתן is used once again in the story (cf. Judg 14:9, 12–13,

19; 15:1–2, 6, 12, 18) to highlight who is giving what or who to whom. Here, it is a

defenseless Samson who is given to the Philistines after the men from Judah "bound him

with two new ropes" (ויאסרהו בשנים עבתים חדשים). The last three words in this clause share

the same cadence, endings, and syllables, therefore providing another example of

homoeopropheron by the authors in the stories.[681] Thus, the MT reads, בִּשְׁנַ֙יִם֙ עֲבֹתִ֣ים חֲדָשִׁ֔ים

("with two new ropes"). Repetition is employed again when the same type of new ropes

used to bind Samson—and subsequently disintegrate in fire—reappear in the Samson and

Delilah story (Judg 16:11–12). The word used here for ropes (עבת) primarily describes

bondage, whether of animals (Ps 118:27; Job 39:10), humans (Judg 15:13–14; 16:11–12;

Ezek 3:25; 4:8), or even Yhwh himself (Ps 2:3), as well as to metaphorically describe

human greatness (Ezek 19:11; 31:3, 10, 14) and lowliness (Isa 5:18; Mic 7:3; Ps 129:4).

Ropes were often used to bind the hands and feet of captives and depicted in the

iconography of Mesopotamian gods and kings leading prisoners by the nose, shown, for

example, in the Victory Stele of Esarhaddon (see Fig 3.5).[682] In the Samson stories, they

help portray the Israelite hero's struggle "zwischen Freiheit und Gebundenheit" as he is

led to the Philistines seemingly helpless and powerless.[683]

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[681] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 241–48.

[682] Tallay Ornan, "Who is Holding the Lead Rope? The Relief of the Broken Obelisk," *Iraq* 69 (2007): 59–72. For the inscriptions, see Verdun Erle Leichty, ed., *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC)*, RINAP 4 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).
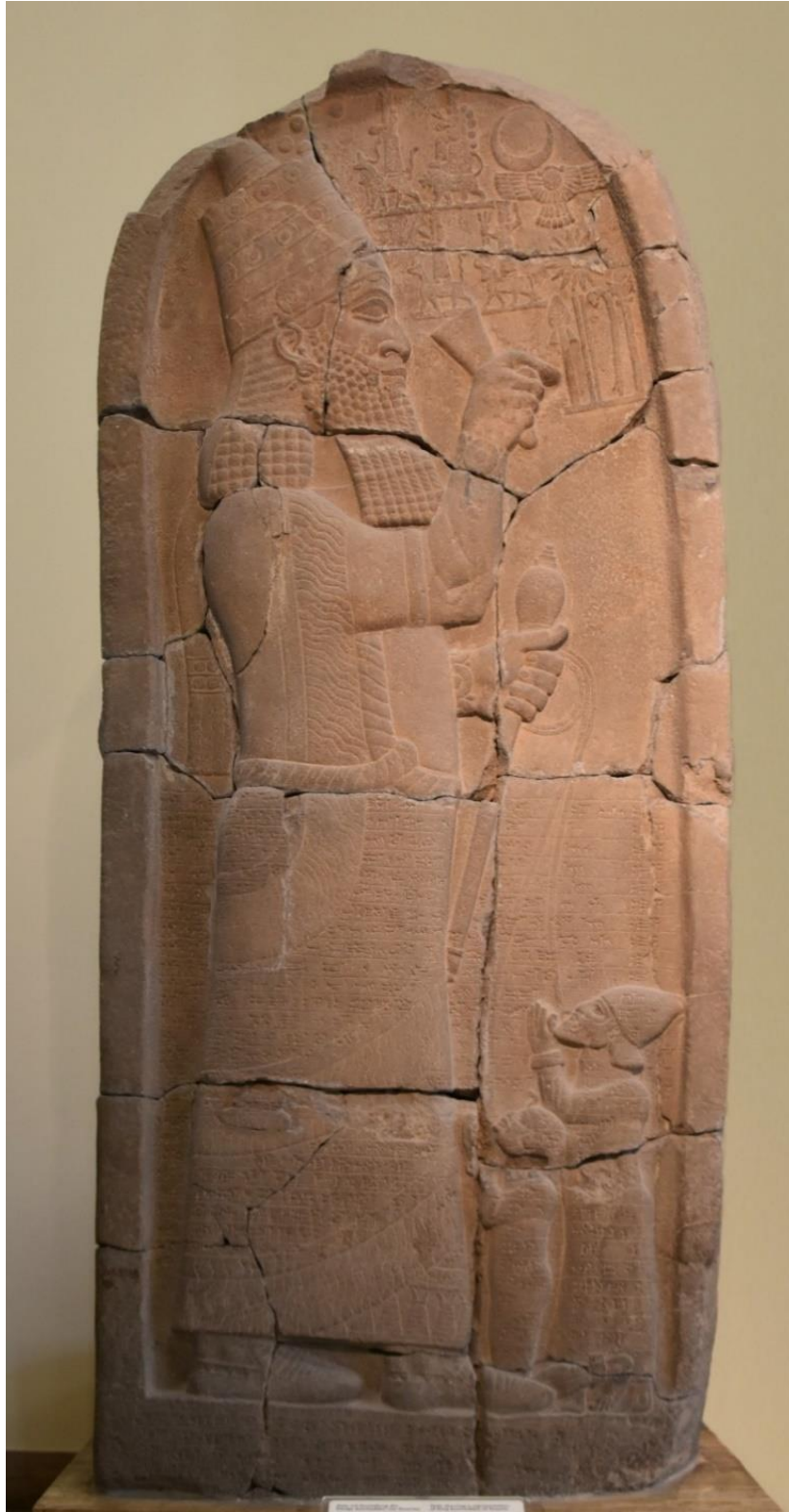
[683] Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam," 549.

Figure 3.5. Victory Stele of Esarhaddon.

Yet rather than suffer humiliation and defeat at the hands of the Philistines shouting to meet him, Samson miraculously prevails through the power of the spirit of Yhwh as the ropes binding him melt off his hands and he slays a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judg 15:14–15). These verses are tightly packed with verbs one after another that creatively interact with the language used earlier in the Samson stories and are brimming with direct and indirect intertextuality and clever wordplay.

Thus, as Samson is led down from the rock to Lehi, the Philistines "shouted to meet him" (הריעו לקראתו). The verb רוע ("to shout") is often used in military texts, especially throughout the DH (e.g., Josh 6:5, 10, 16, 20; Judg 7:21; 1 Sam 4:5; 10:24; 17:25, 52), and was likely intended here as a victorious war cry by the Philistines. However, such victory is short lived, because for the third and final time, "the spirit of Yhwh rushed upon him" (ותצלח עליו רוח יהוה), transforming Samson into an almost mythical superhuman. As noted above, the verb צלח is used this way only in other Deuteronomistic texts and with other heroic figures in Israel, particularly Saul and David (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13; 18:10). Such divine power often engulfs the person just before a battle or violent outrage, and Samson is no exception, since each of his violent acts becomes even more extraordinary than the last (cf. Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14).[684] The verb that describes the shouting (רוּעַ) of the Philistines and the reappearance of the spirit (רוּחַ) of Yhwh both share the same, two, initial consonants and vowels, functioning as another example of *homoeopropheron* by the authors (cf. Judg 14:14, 18–19; 15:13).[685] While empowered by the spirit of Yhwh, several miraculous things happen in quick succession.

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[684] Levine, "Religion in the Heroic Spirit," 36; and Johnson, "'Spirit of Yhwh.'"

[685] Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient*, 241–48.

Hence, the ropes upon Samson's arms became "like flax that is consumed with fire, and his bonds melted from upon his hands" (Judg 15:14). Like many other times in the Samson stories, the authors utilize words with multiple meanings. Accordingly, the ropes literally binding Samson's "arms" (זרועות) are also metaphorically binding his "strength" (זרוע), a sense found elsewhere in the Bible (cf. 1 Sam 2:31; Jer 17:5; Ezek 22:6). The authors note how the ropes with which the men of Judah bind Samson's arms become "like flax" (כפשתים), a plant used to make fibers, oils, and candle wicks—appropriate symbols for what is about to happen—as well as to symbolically describe the wickedness of Judah and Israel (cf. Jer 13:1–11; Hos 2:5, 9).[686] Like the agrarian fields of Timnah (Judg 15:5), the ropes are also consumed with fire by Samson. The prefixed preposition in the beginning of the description creates a simile ("the ropes on his arms became **like flax** [כפשתים] that is consumed with fire"), while the second half of the verse makes it clear that Samson's bonds (אסור) literally melt (מסס) off his hands, highlighting his epic, perhaps even semi-divine, nature.

However, rather than say the ropes (עבת) melted off his hands, a rare word for "bonds" (אסור) is used instead, which itself is derivative of a frequently used verb (אסו) in the Samson stories (Judg 15:10, 12–13; 16:5–8, 10–13, 21). The word אסור is only used three other times in the Bible, two of which describe the bonds of an imprisoned prison (Jer 37:15; Qoh 4:14) and one that warns against being caught in the bonds of a cunning woman's hands and heart (Qoh 7:26)—central themes in the following Samson and Delilah stories (Judg 16:4–21). However, before a mob of angry Philistines, the bonds

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[686] Shahal Abbo, Avi Gopher, Gila Kahila Bar-Gal, *The Origins of Plant Domestication in the ancient Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 110–11, 144–46.

(אסור) melt off Samson's very hands. In a similar way that the fear of Israel and Israel's enemies is described as their "hearts melting" (e.g., Deut 1:28; 20:8; Josh 2:11; 5:1; 7:5; 2 Sam 17:10; cf. Isa 13:7; 19:1; Ezek 21:7; Nah 2:10; Ps 22:14) and Yhwh declares that he will punish the king of Assyria (Isa 10:12–19) like a mighty flame that melts his body and soul (Isa 10:16–18), Samson proceeds to decimate a thousand Philistines by that same uncontrollable and unquenchable godly fire (Judg 15:15–17).[687]

Such divine power is depicted in iconography, such as that surrounding the sun god Shamash (see Fig. 3.6) or Ashurbanipal in battle (see Fig. 3.7), and it is described throughout ancient Near East texts, including the Bible (e.g., Exod 15; Judg 5; 2 Sam 22; Ezek 1; Ps 18). Dylan Johnson compares some of these texts with the core Samson stories, drawing upon the Akkadian terms *melammu* and *puluḫtu*, both of which he notes "referred to the overwhelming and overpowering strength or vitality of divine beings, objects, kings, and heroes […] envisioned as a resplendent light, an alienable component of divine and royal bodies that would inspire terrifying fear."[688] These concepts are reflected, for example, when Samson is empowered by the spirit of Yhwh attacking a ferocious lion (Judg 14:6) or throngs of Philistines (Judg 14:19; 15:14), or in the royal inscription of Sennacherib, who, after defeating Hezekiah, claims that "fear of my lordly brilliance (*melammu*) overwhelmed (*puluḫtu*) him!"[689]

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[687] For more on the power of the spirit of Yhwh as a mighty fire, see Levine, "Religion in the Heroic Spirit"; and Johnson, "'Spirit of Yhwh.'" Moshe Weinfeld includes נמס/המס לב ("to melt the heart") among his Deuteronomic phraseology (*Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 344).

[688] Johnson, "'Spirit of Yhwh,'" 219. CAD M/2 9–12; CAD P 505–09.

[689] RINAP 3/1, 177: Sennacherib 22, col. iii, 37b–38.

In an in-depth study exploring more of these parallels with the Bible, Shawn Zelig

Aster describes *melammu* as follows:

> *Melammu* refers to a quality of overwhelming and overpowering strength,
> and it can be defined as "the covering, out layer, or outward appearance of
> a person, being, or object, or rays emanating from a person or being, that
> demonstrate the irresistible or supreme power of that person, being or
> object." A god who possesses *melammu* is sovereign, a person who
> possesses *melammu* is unbeatable, and a force which possesses *melammu*
> cannot successfully be stopped. In second-millennium mythic texts, the
> *melammu* is portrayed as a cloak or covering, which is often radiant. But
> many texts ascribe *melammu* to objects that are not radiant, and radiance is
> not an intrinsic element of *melammu* in many periods. *Melammu*
> consistently refers to power, but does not consistently refer to radiance,
> until the eighth century.[690]
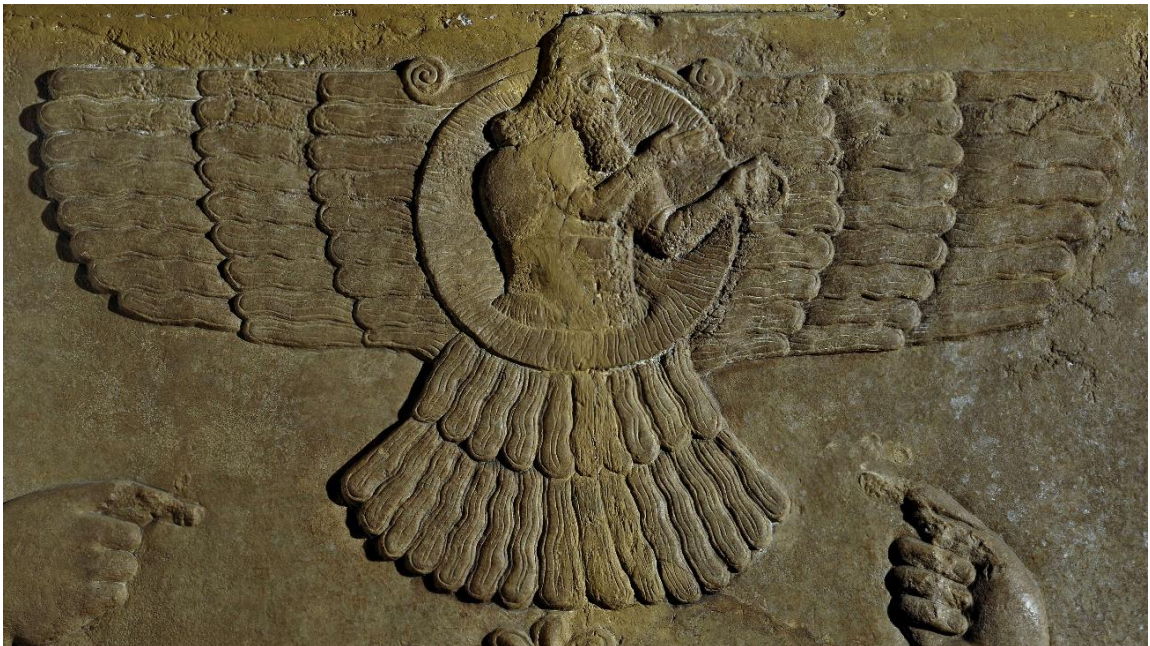
Figure 3.6. Shamash Surrounded by His *Melammu*.

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[690] Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and its Biblical Parallels* (Münster:
Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 352.

Figure 3.7. Ashurbanipal Shooting His Bow.

This terrifying and unbeatable force reaches its pinnacle when Samson slaughters one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judg 15:15) and lives to tell the tale (Judg 15:16). The authors' description of the jawbone as "fresh" (טרי) was likely intended to emphasize that the bone was not dry and brittle and therefore effective at thrashing Philistines. It may also foreshadow the unspoken and rather uncommon synonym for the word "fresh" (לֹח) used in the Samson and Delilah stories to describe the cords binding Samson (Judg 16:7–8) just as other bondage was used to restrain him at Lehi (לֹחי).[691] There may however be more to this rare word, which appears only one other time in the

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[691] Nelson, *Judges*, 258.

Bible. Hence, at the beginning of the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes the sin of Israel like the "fresh wound" (מכה טריה) of someone who has been repeatedly struck (נכה) from head to toe (Isa 1:5–6). Similarly, Samson repeatedly strikes (נכה) a thousand Philistines, whose wounds are likely not just fresh, but fatal. The rarity of the word may have perplexed the Greek translators and explain why they described where the jawbone was located rather than its age. Thus, while the LXX^A reads, "And he found a jawbone of an ass **thrown by the wayside**" (εὗρεν σιαγόνα ὄνου **ἐρριμμένην ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ**), and the LXX^B reads, "And he found a jawbone of an ass **cast aside**" (καὶ εὗρε σιαγόνα ὄνου **ἐξερριμένη**), the MT instead simply reads, "And he found **a fresh** jawbone of an ass" (וַיִּמְצָא לְחִי־חֲמוֹר **טְרִיָּה**). Many commentators have interpreted this scene as another example of Samson disobeying the rules of the Nazirite vow given to Moses by Yhwh in the book of Numbers (Num 6:1–21).[692] Yet, most scholars consider that a late Priestly text and a vow different than the one in the Samson stories.[693] Therefore, if the core stories (Judg 14–15) predate Samson's characterization as a Nazirite (Judg 13:5, 7; 16:17α) in both the first (Judg 16) and second (Judg 13) major additions to the text, as argued above and elsewhere, then the use of the jawbone of an ass for the massacre of the Philistines fits perfectly well into these epic and folkloric features of the story.

Accordingly, this story is part of the oral and literary traditions reflecting the heroic cultures of Israel and Judah, seen, for example, with Shamgar son of Anat (Judg 5:6), who killed six-hundred Philistines (Judg 3:31), or David, who killed the Philistine

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[692] Boling, *Judges*, 219–21, 50; Butler, *Judges*, 324–26, 335–36, 343; and Webb, *Judges*, 351–52, 387.

[693] Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 215–26, 229–35; Stipp, "Simson, der Nasiräer,"; Lemardelé, "Samson le *nazir*"; idem, "Être nazir"; Niditch, "Nazirite Vow"; Nelson, *Judges*, 240–41.

champion, Goliath (1 Sam 17:50), or with one of David's mighty men, Shammah son of

Agee, the Hararite, who also killed numerous Philistines at Lehi (2 Sam 23:11–12).[694]

Each of these warriors "killed" or "struck down" (ויך) the Philistines (Judg 3:31; 14:19;

15:8, 15–16; 2 Sam 23:12) using the Hiphil form of the verb נכה ("to strike"). Moreover,

whether Shamgar's cattle prod (מלמד), Samson's jawbone (לחי), or David's sling (קלע), an

unexpected weapon with which to strike the Philistine(s) is used by each, elevating the

epic and folkloric features of the stories.[695] Following Samson's martial triumph over the

thousand Philistines who shouted and sought to capture—and likely kill—him, Samson

gives a victorious speech:

וַיֹּאמֶר שִׁמְשׁוֹן בִּלְחִי הַחֲמוֹר חֲמוֹר חֲמֹרָתָיִם בִּלְחִי הַחֲמוֹר הִכֵּיתִי אֶלֶף אִישׁ
"And Samson said, "With the jawbone of an ass, mass, masses, with the jawbone of an ass, I killed a thousand men." (MT Judg 15:16)
καὶ εἶπεν Σαμψων Ἐν σιαγόνι ὄνου ἐξαλείφων ἐξήλειψα αὐτούς, ὅτι ἐν σιαγόνι ὄνου ἐπάταξα χιλίους ἄνδρας.
And Samson said, "I have wiped them out, wiping them out with an ass's jawbone, for with the ass's jawbone, I have struck down a thousand men." (LXX Judg 15:16)

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[694] For more on the ways in which the oral and literary traditions of Israel and Judah coalesce into the composition of the Bible, see Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*. For more on the hero traditions of ancient Israel and Judah, see Mobley, *Empty Men*; and Smith, *Poetic Heroes*.

[695] Although a sling was a common military weapon used in the ancient world, it was unexpected in the David and Goliath story as David is initially fashioned by Saul with armor that does not fit him and a sword too heavy to effectively yield (1 Sam 17:38–39). The text does not say whether Shammah used any weapon, itself an unbelievable feat. For more, see McCarter, *I Samuel*, 284–98; and Steven L. McKenzie, *King David – A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 69–89 [esp. 77].

On Shamgar son of Anat, see Mark S. Smith, "'Midrash' in the Book of Judges: The Cases of Judges 3:31 and 6:7–10," *CBQ* 78 (2016): 256–71; and Klaas Spronk, "Shamgar ben Anat (Judg 3:31) – A Meaningful Name," *ZAW* 128 (2016): 684–87.

Like the language games played at his wedding, Samson again uses wordplay

through the paronomasia and polysemy of his victory speech (Judg 15:16), which is

followed by a cheeky gesture with his weaponized jawbone and an etymological

placename (Judg 15:17). Samson only celebrates his victory with nine words, six of

which are repetitive and poetically structured in a parallel fashion typical in the Bible.[696]

Thus, "jawbone" (לחי) and "ass" (חמור) are used at the beginning and end of the verse,

while "mass" (חמר) is used twice in the center. As noted above, לחי is also the name of the

location where the melee occurs, and it is used by the narrator in the next verse for the

etymological placename. Following the NJPS, the words "ass" (חמור) and "mass" (חמר)

are used here instead of "donkey" and "heap" to capture both the punning and rhyming in

the Hebrew: "With the jawbone of an **ass**, **mass, masses**, with the jawbone of an **ass**"

(בלחי **החמור חמור חמרתים** בלחי **החמור**).[697]

The roots of the words for "ass" (חמור) and "mass" (חמר) are homophones and

very likely related, perhaps ultimately deriving from the same semitic words for clay.[698]

Here, they describe the subject and (indirect) object of the verse and emphasize Samson's

dominance over the land and language of the Philistines to the audience. However, in the

Greek, the translators use the separate verb ἐξαλείφω ("to blot out, smear, or wipe away")

to metaphorically describe Samson's action: "I have wiped them out, wiping them out

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[696] See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. and upd. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011); and F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[697] Compare the following line from "The Dedication of the Shamash Temple" by Yahdun-Lim: "He routed their army and the army who had come to their help, made a massacre (among them). (Then) he erected piles of their corpses." *ANET*, 556–57.

[698] Thus, חֹמֶר ("clay") and חָמַר ("to be red"). The authors draw upon the words for clay and mortar again in the placename when Elohim splits open the "mortar" (מַכְתֵּשׁ).

with a donkey's jawbone" (Εν σιαγόνι ὄνου ἐξαλείφων ἐξήλειψα αὐτούς). While many commentators compare Delilah with Jael (e.g., Judg 5:27; 16:20), few note her similarity with Samson, particularly the concise syntax to describe when Jael "reached out her hand for the tent peg, and her right hand for the hammer, and struck Sisera, smashed his head, and shattered and pierced his temple" (Judg 5:26), and when Samson "found a fresh jawbone of an ass, reached out and took it, and struck a thousand men with it" (Judg 15:15), especially since both verses are concretely described with four rapid verbs.[699] Elsewhere, the texts echo the psalmist who petitions the divine: "Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God, for you have struck all my enemies on the cheek, the teeth of the wicked you have shattered!" (Ps 3:7). Indeed, by the power of the spirit of Yhwh, Samson struck down one thousand enemies, likely shattering many teeth in the process with his infamous jawbone, which some have likened to a bladed sickle.[700] Though the French philosopher, and acerbic writer, Voltaire, would eventually say "that the only ass's jawbone in this story is that of the author who made it up," the extraordinary number of Philistines slain is not surprising in the Samson stories and those numbers only become more extraordinary as the stories continue to unfold (cf. Judg 16:27–30).[701]

After finishing his speech, Samson threw the jawbone from his hands and named the site, "Ramath-Lehi" (רמת לחי). The Piel of כלה ("to be complete, at an end, finished") in construct with דבר often describes when a prominent figure has finished speaking at an important moment, including Yhwh (Gen 18:33; Exod 31:18), Moses (Exod 34:33; Num

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[699] The one exception found here was by Spronk (*Judges*, 432–33).

[700] Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 184–85.

[701] Gunn, *Judges*, 206–09.

16:31), and David (1 Sam 18:1; 24:16). However, during Samson's speech, it is not clear

to whom he is speaking—perhaps to God, Judahites, Philistines, or Samson himself—

further highlighting the individualistic nature of Samson's character. In yet another form

of paronomasia, the authors play with the homonyms רָמָה ("height") and רָמָה ("to cast")

and simultaneously produce two, folkloric, etymological placenames, "Jawbone Height"

and "Cast Jawbone," the former describing the nature of the site and the latter the

assertive action by Samson (Judg 15:17). In alignment with Samson's victory speech, the

authors of both the LXX[A] and LXX[B] read "Jawbone Slaying" (Ἀναίρεσις σιαγόνος) for

the placename at Lehi (Judg 15:17), cleverly using the verb ἀναίρεσις that encompasses

the meaning of taking dead bodies up or away for burial (cf. Ezra 2:34) and of destroying

or slaying people (cf. Num 11:15). As a synonym to the throwing (שלך) of the jawbone

mentioned earlier in the verse, רמה can also mean to deal treacherously with another,

something that Samson successfully does repeatedly with the Philistines, especially here

at Lehi. Furthermore, the heights that רמה typically describe are the idolatrous high places

the prophet Ezekiel sternly warns the people of Jerusalem to avoid (cf. Ezek 16:24–25,

31, 39), which the authors of the Samson stories may have had in mind when morbidly

including piles and piles of dead Philistines in the narrative only ten kilometers west of

Jerusalem's gates (Judg 15:16).[702]

    Rather than naturally end the story with Samson's victory speech and etymology,

the narrative focus shifts and Samson cries out to Yhwh in a desperate plea (Judg 15:18),

which is miraculously answered by Elohim, resulting in another etymology (Judg 15:19).

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[702] For the most likely location of Lehi, see Boling, *Judges*, 238; Lubetski, "Lehi," *ABD* 4:274–75; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 529; and Gass, "Simson und die Philister," 378–79.

As explored below, this scene is unusual, since the deity has largely been elusive thus far, only appearing in what some consider a narrative obtrusion at the beginning of the core Samson stories (Judg 14:4), and then secondarily by the advents of the spirit of Yhwh (Judg 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).[703] While many scholars have found these divine actions to be theological additions awkwardly imposed upon originally secular stories, others, such as Crenshaw, Exum, and James Wharton, argue that this prayer and other occasions of the deity working in the background (Judg 13:1, 9; 24; 15:19; 16:20) tie all the Samson stories together.[704] Whether original to the Samson stories or not, these parts of the final forms of the text have a literary and theological function within the whole composition, which is explored below.

Thus, the beginning of the verse starts with the narrator noting how Samson became very thirsty (Judg 15:18). The verb צמא ("to be thirsty") is only used ten times in the Bible, one of which is in a wilderness tradition during the Exodus (Exod 17:1–7) that draws many parallels with the scene here (see below) and another that again recalls the tale of Jael and Sisera (Judg 4:19). The combination of צמא with the adjective מאד by the authors to describe Samson as "very thirsty" is the only one in the Bible, emphasizing the desperation and exasperation of the hot-headed hero of the story. Samson proceeds then to call or cry (קרא) out to Yhwh, marking the first time in all the Samson stories that the main character speaks to the deity.[705] The phrasing here, that is, "and he called out to

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[703] Paris, *Narrative Obtrusions*, 69–99.

[704] Crenshaw, *Samson*, 130–35; James A. Wharton, "The Secret of Yahweh – Story and Affirmation in Judges 13–16," *INT* 27 (1973): 48–66; and Exum, "Theological Dimension." Instead of prayer, Blenkinsopp and Greenstein posit that the Nazirite vow is the centralizing factor for the Samson stories. For more, see Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Style"; and Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson."

Yhwh" (ויקרא אל־יהוה), often describes the action of major figures in the DH, including Samuel (1 Sam 12:18), Elijah (1 Kgs 17:20–21), Isaiah (2 Kgs 20:11), and by Samson again at the end of his life (Judg 16:28). Furthermore, the phrasing in these texts also functions as part of a biblical type-scene in the DH.[706] Hence, Samuel calls out to Yhwh and Yhwh performs a miracle by sending rain and thunder upon the land, to which the people ask Samuel for the "Lord, your God" to keep them from dying (1 Sam 12:18–19). Elijah calls out to the "Lord, my God" and Yhwh performs a miracle by restoring the life of a widow's dead son, to which the woman immediately recognizes Elijah as a man of God (1 Kgs 17:20–24). Isaiah responds to Hezekiah's prayer on behalf of "the Lord, God," and Yhwh performs a miracle by healing Hezekiah and adding fifteen more years to his life (2 Kgs 20:1–11). Lastly, in the final, climatic scene of the Samson stories, Samson calls out to Yhwh, to whom he refers to as "Lord God," and Yhwh miraculously restores his strength, allowing Samson to tear down the pillars upholding the temple of Dagon (Judg 16:28–30). In each of these moments in the DH, a prominent figure, most often a prophet, calls out to Yhwh and uses both titles for the deity, "Yhwh" (יהוה) and "Elohim" (אלהים), and the deity performs a miracle in response to their supplication.[707]

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[705] While the LXX^A reads "he called out to the Lord" (ἐβόησεν πρὸς κύριον), the LXX^B reads "he wept to the Lord" (ἔκλαυσε πρὸς Κύριον), perhaps to emphasize Samson's desperation.

[706] On biblical type-scenes, see Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 55–78.

[707] The other two occurrences of this phrasing are in the book of Chronicles, which also involve a major figure and a miracle (1 Chr 21:26; 2 Chr 14:11). Thus, David calls out to Yhwh and Yhwh performs a miracle by bringing down fire from heaven and onto the altar (1 Chr 21:17–27) and Asa calls out to Yhwh and Yhwh performs a miracle by defeating the million-man army of Ethiopians (2 Chr 14:9–15). David and Asa also refer to the deity with both titles "Yhwh" (יהוה) and "Elohim" (אלהים). Furthermore, these texts almost certainly draw upon their older, Deuteronomistic counterparts (cf. 2 Sam 24; 2 Kgs 15).

What are the purposes of these biblical type-scenes? Are they merely literary conventions in the DH or something more? In response to these questions, Alter carefully observes how they are "a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning," a pattern which extends and evolves across the compositional history of the DH, as argued here.[708] What, then, does this moment in the Samson stories mean and how does it fit within the larger historical and theological corpus of the DH? In other words, what is the nature of Samson's prayer?

Samson's prayer to the deity contains two parts. First, Samson acknowledges "this great deliverance" (התשועה הגדלה הזאת) that Yhwh has given by the hand of Yhwh's servant, that is, by Samson. Second, Samson asks whether Yhwh will allow him to die of thirst and "fall into the hand of the uncircumcised" (ונפלתי ביד הערלים).[709] The word for "deliverance" or "salvation" (תשועה) is most often used in the DH for describing military victories (e.g., 1 Sam 11:9, 13; 19:5; 2 Sam 19:3; 23:10, 12; 2 Kgs 5:1; 13:17) and only several texts (cf. Judg 15:18; 1 Sam 19:5, 2 Sam 23:10) describe a "great deliverance." Each of those texts that name a great deliverance describes the defeat of a Philistine or Philistines by a heroic figure, whether Samson (Judg 15:14–18), David (1 Sam 19:5–8), or Eleazar (2 Sam 23:9–10). In Samson's speech, he refers to himself as Yhwh's servant, something only spoken of by other major figures in the DH, namely Moses (Deut 3:24), Samuel (1 Sam 3:10), David (1 Sam 23:10–11; 2 Sam 7:19–21, 25–29; 24:10), Solomon

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[708] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 71.

[709] The Philistines are referred to as "the uncircumcised" (הערלים) only in other Deuteronomistic texts (1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20) with the sole exception of Saul's death, which is likely a repeat by the Chronicler (1 Chr 10:4) of the same account in Samuel (1 Sam 31:4).

(1 Kgs 8:28, 29, 30, 52), and Elijah (1 Kgs 18:36), thereby inviting the hearer and reader to draw comparisons with Samson.

The second part of Samson's speech is abrupt and begins with the disjunctive waw on the adverb ועתה ("now then"), leading to Samson's rhetorical question of whether he should die by thirst and fall into the hand of the Philistines. Falling into the hands of the Philistines is likely a concern echoing the death of Saul, with whom Samson shares many characteristics, since he is portrayed as falling into the hands of the Philistines.[710] Hence, following his suicide before the Philistine army, Saul is decapitated, stripped naked, and fastened to the wall of Beth-shan by the Philistines in the book of Samuel (1 Sam 31:8–10). Elsewhere, in the Chronicler(s)'s depiction of the Neo-Assyrian army's siege of Jerusalem, death by thirst is also threatened to King Hezekiah and all those living in Jerusalem by the servants of Sennacherib, something not included in the account by the author(s) of the book of Kings or Isaiah (2 Chr 32:11; cf. 2 Kgs 18:29; Isa 36:4–5).[711] In an inverted prayer by Samson to have Yhwh save his servant from dying of thirst and falling into the hand of the Philistines (Judg 15:18), Sennacherib's servants warn those living in Jerusalem of dying of thirst (2 Chr 32:11) and falling into the hand of the Assyrians (2 Chr 32:13–15, 17). Yet, as noted above, if the prayers of Yhwh's servants are answered, then the deity intervenes, which occurs in both stories, as Samson's life is

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[710] Simcha Shalom Brooks, "Saul and the Samson Narrative," *JSOT* 71 (1996): 19–25; and J. Cheryl Exum, "Samson and Saul: The Comic and the Tragic Visions," in *Samson and Delilah – Selected Essays*, Hebrew Bible Monograph 87 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020), 77–113.

[711] For the importance of textual criticism and the Chronicler(s)'s use of earlier biblical books to possibly determine the underlying reasons for the literary depictions of each account, see Knoppers, *I Chronicles 1–9*, 52–71. Death by famine and thirst in the Chronicler(s)'s account (2 Chr 32:11) may be a less obscene rephrasing of the Rabshakeh asking the Judahites whether they would like "to eat their own dung and drink their own urine" (2 Kgs 18:27; Isa 36:12).

miraculously spared from thirst and the hand of the Philistines (Judg 15:19) and Jerusalem is likewise miraculously spared from thirst and the hand of the Neo-Assyrian army (2 Chr 32:20–23; cf. 2 Kgs 18:35–37).

However, it is not Yhwh who answers Samson's call but rather Elohim. Thus, Elohim "splits" (בקע) open the "hollow place" or "mortar" (מכתש) at Lehi from which water emerges, Samson drinks and revives, and a new name is given to it, "En-hakkore" (עין הקורא), meaning "Spring of the Caller" (Judg 15:19).[712] Although their locations have long been debated, McKinny has convincingly argued that "Ramath-lehi and En-hakkore should be associated with Khirbet ʿAin el-Lehi and located at ʿAin Hanniyeh, the largest and best-known spring in the vicinity."[713] Many rightfully argue that the name in the etiology originally meant, "Spring of the Partridge," taken from the homonyms קֹרֵא ("partridge") and קָרָא ("to call").[714] This older meaning adds then another folkloric feature—and animal—to the Samson stories as well as resonates with one of the only other mentions of a קֹרֵא in the Bible (1 Sam 26:20; Jer 17:11). Thus, in the book of Samuel, David, while hiding on the hill of Hachilah from the deadly pursuit of Saul (1 Sam 26), refers to himself as Saul's servant (1 Sam 26:18–19), pleads with Saul to spare his life, and claims that to pursue him is as frivolous as hunting "a partridge in the mountains" (1 Sam 26:20).[715] Similarly, both Samson and David begin the address to

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[712] The LXX^A reads "Spring-Summoned-by-Jawbone" (Πηγὴ ἐπίκλητος σιαγόνος), while LXX^B reads "Caller's Spring, which is in Jawbone" (Πηγὴ τοῦ ἐπικαλουμένου, ἥ ἐστιν ἐν Σιαγόνι), thus dividing the name ("Caller's Spring") and placement ("Jawbone") of the site into two halves (Judg 15:19).

[713] McKinny, "'Shall I Die of Thirst?'," 64.

[714] See Moore, *Judges*, 347; Gunkel, "Simson," 49; Burney, *Book of Judges*, 375; Boling, *Judges*, 240; Crenshaw, *Samson*, 12, 41; Groß, *Richter*, 708; Alter, *Former Prophets*, 187; Nelson, *Judges*, 255; Bachmann, *Judges*, 178).

their lords with ועתה ("now then"), both refer to themselves as their lords' servant, and both plead with their lords to spare their lives from the hand of their enemies on a hilltop (Judg 15:18; 1 Sam 26:20). Differences, of course, exist between the two texts, including the specific characters, locations, and miraculous intervention by the deity. Moreover, the "lord" (אדון) addressed in David's story is Saul while the "Lord" (יהוה) addressed in Samson's story is the God of Israel. Yet, this latter difference is minor, since Yhwh is mentioned by David throughout the story (1 Sam 26:9–11, 16, 19, 20, 23–24) and David is repeatedly called "Yhwh's anointed" (1 Sam 26: 9, 11, 16, 23). Once again, the intertextual connections between Samson, Saul, and David abound.[716]

The word בקע used in this verse (Judg 15:19) is one of the few verbs that describes the deity miraculously splitting open the earth for water in the Bible (Isa 35:6; 48:21; Hab 3:9; Ps 74:15; 78:15) as well as for splitting the sea during the exodus from Egypt (Exod 14:16, 21; Isa 63:12; Neh 9:11; Ps 78:13).[717] The Greek authors again use more anatomical descriptions of Lehi (e.g., σιαγόνα) and its subsequent placenames in their textual editions. Thus, the LXX[A] reads "God opened the wound of the jawbone" (ἤνοιξεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ τραῦμα τῆς σιαγόνος), while the LXX[B] reads "God broke open the pit

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[715] As McCarter notes: "There is a bit of wordplay going on in this metaphor. David is standing on a mountain (v 13) calling (v 14), and he compares Saul's pursuit of him to the hunting of 'the caller' in the mountains. Specifically the play revolves upon Abiner's question in v 14, *mî 'attâ haqqôrē'* […] 'Who is it that calls?' or more literally, 'Who are you, O caller?' Thus in David's reply he wryly compares himself to 'the caller' hunted in the mountains. […] Wordplay aside, the metaphor is particularly apt, since the partridge seems to have been hunted by relentless chasing." McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 408.

[716] Brooks, "Saul and the Samson Narrative"; Peterson, "Samson: Hero or Villain?"; John William Herbst, "Valuing Leadership and Love: David Exceeding Samson," *JSOT* 43 (2019): 491–505; and Exum, "Samson and Saul."

[717] Some of the other very similar texts that use different language include the books of Exodus (Exod 17:6), Numbers (Num 20:11), and Psalms (Ps 78:20), in which Moses is commanded to "strike" (נכה) a rock from which water miraculously emerges.

in the jawbone" (ἔρρηξεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν λάκκον τὸν ἐν τῇ σιαγόνι). Instead of the "hollow place" or "mortar" (מכתש) at Lehi, from which the miraculous water emerges, the LXX[A] describes "the wound" (τὸ τραῦμα) being opened by God, which means a hurtful injury and/or a heavy blow during military defeat—fitting descriptions for Samson's defeat of the Philistines as well as a wounded jawbone. Meanwhile, in a clever form of wordplay, the LXX[B] describes how God broke open "the pit" (τὸν λάκκον) of the jawbone, thereby depicting an opening of the literal jawbone, the location of "Jawbone" (σιαγόνα) itself, a small pool of water, and a term possibly used for reservoirs storing wine, oil, and grain— all Philistine produce that Samson infamously destroyed (Judg 15:5).

In a succession of three Qal consecutive-imperfect verbs, the water (מים) that Samson drinks (שתה), returns (שוב) his spirit (רוח), and he is revived (חיה). Unlike the spirit of Yhwh that repeatedly rushed upon Samson earlier in the stories, the miraculous water Samson drank at Lehi "returned **his** spirit" (ותשב רוחו) and not the deity's. The range of meaning for רוח ("breath, wind, spirit") in the Bible and its Semitic cognates is vast.[718] Carol Newsom argues it is important to understand רוח ultimately as a substance rather than an action, that is, as something that inhabits the person rather than simply the act of taking a breath, especially when considering the ways in which it portrays human and/or divine agency in the Bible.[719] In the Samson stories, such agency is unrecognized by the human characters inside the story, although the narrator reveals to the hearer and reader that Yhwh is working behind the scenes (Judg 14:4), typifying what Newsom

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[718] Sven Tengström and Heinz-Josef Fabry, "רוּחַ rûaḥ," *TDOT* XIII:365–402.

[719] Carol Newsom, *The Spirit within Me: Self and Agency in Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 36–47.

refers to as "subconscious co-agency" between God and humans in the narrative.[720]

Samson appears unaware that it is the divine spirit of Yhwh empowering his tremendous

feats of strength (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), even when it pounds inside of him (Judg 13:25),

and only addresses Yhwh when his life is on the line (Judg 15:18; 16:28). Newsom

elaborates:

> That the *rûaḥ* breath is conceived of as substance rather than what we would refer to as the act of breathing is evident from the way the *rûaḥ* is understood to be gathered up at death and returned to God. Although in most contexts the *rûaḥ* is not experienced as conveying any qualia beyond vitality, sentience, and agency, its divine origin allows for the development of this locative model to include an account of the exceptional wisdom or understanding possessed by some persons. The godlike nature of the *rûaḥ* is more palpable in these references, though it is integrated into the psychosomatic nature of the individual. Where the context involves more of a stress on active divine co-agency, then the model shifts from being wind-breath placed into the body to a model of wind-force that is external but contiguous to the person, with one exception. When this co-agency has to do specifically with divine influence on perceptions, belief, and thoughts, then the model is closer to the insertion of *rûaḥ* into the mind/heart of the person.[721]

On the one hand, then, the combination of רוח and חיה in the story (Judg 15:19)

very likely means that Samson's "life-breath returned, and he survived" (ותשב רוחו ויחי),

especially when compared with the same or similar constructions in the Bible (e.g., Gen

45:27; 1 Sam 30:12; 1 Kgs 10:5). It is describing Samson's physical survival after his

tremendous battle at Lehi.[722] On the other hand, the Samson stories have been epic thus

far, if not mythological. Accordingly, the consumption of this miraculously drawn water

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[720] Newsom, *Spirit within Me*, 32–36 [esp. 33].

[721] Newsom, *Spirit within Me*, 47.

[722] Boling argues for paronomasia between בַּלֶּחִי ("in Lehi") and וַיֶּחִי ("and he survived") in Judg 15:19, concluding that "[i]t is now clear why in the case of Samson the judge formula only occurs for the first time in 15:20. That is, all of the Samson stories to this point have been concerned with his becoming really 'alive,' his enlistment as Yahwist judge" (Boling, *Judges*, 240).

may also narrate the revivified and semi-divine spirit of Samson, whose fiery path of destruction seemingly has no end. Like the rest of the Samson stories, the layers of meaning appear to function on multiple levels, whether intertextually or intratextually, and the Spring of the Caller/Partridge is no exception. William H. C. Propp argues that these folkloric and/or mythological stories about divine sources of water breaking through the earth—as well as those falling from the heavens (e.g., Gen 7:11)—are better understood as mighty streams, which raises the question of the type of spring the authors had in mind here, given the elevated nature of the Samson stories noted above.[723]

One text that might help answer that question is another biblical type-scene that also utilizes the uncommon verb צמא ("to be thirsty") and is very similar to Samson's address to Yhwh and subsequent etiologies (Judg 15:18–19), and that is the story of the Israelites, Moses, Yhwh, and the miraculous springs of Massah-Meribah (Exod 17:1–7). In the book of Exodus, the Israelites quarrel (ריב) with Moses and test (נסה) Yhwh about possibly dying from thirst in the wilderness (Exod 17:2–3). Exasperated, Moses cries out to Yhwh (Exod 17:4) and Yhwh responds by miraculously drawing water forth from a rock at Horeb, thereby satiating the Israelites' thirst (Exod 17:5–6). The site is given two etymological placenames, Massah ("test") and Meribah ("quarrel"), which describe the action by the Israelites against Moses and Yhwh in the wilderness (Exod 17:4). Similarly, both Samson and Moses cry out (קרא) to Yhwh to be rescued from dying of thirst (צמא), Yhwh responds to both pleas by miraculously drawing water (מים) from the ground upon

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[723] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 601–13.

which they stand, and two etymological placenames are provided in each story, namely Massah and Meribah (Exod 17:7) and Ramath-Lehi and En-hakkore (Judg 15:18–19).

Differences, of course, exist between these texts as well. Yet they are likely intended to draw the hearers' and readers' attention to them and communicate something through their contrasting details. Accordingly, Moses and Samson are meant to be leaders of Israel, however, Samson never leads anyone, whereas Moses is legendary for the ways in which he leads Israel out of Egypt and to the promised land. The contrast in leadership is highlighted by the different *Sitz im Leben* of each prayer. Thus, Moses prays to Yhwh on behalf of the Israelites, whereas Samson prays only for himself. The Israelites quarrel with Moses and test Yhwh, while Samson implicitly does both with Yhwh. The mighty streams needed to quell the thirst of thousands of Israelites wandering in the desert, then, overshadow the single pool of water likely needed to restore the single life of Samson. The similarities and differences in these type-scenes highlight the same oral and literary traditions the biblical authors drew upon and point to those with which their hearers and readers were likely familiar. Therefore, the similarities and dissimilarities between these type-scenes are most likely authorial decisions made to portray certain aspects, features, traits, and qualities of the characters in their stories. Alter explains:

Since biblical narrative characteristically catches its protagonists only at the critical and revealing points in their lives, the biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence but at the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes, from conception and birth to betrothal to deathbed. Not every type-scene will occur for every major hero, though often the absence of a particular type-scene may itself be significant. […] What I am suggesting is that the contemporary audiences of these tales, being perfectly familiar with the convention, took particular pleasure in seeing how in each instance the convention could be, through the narrator's art, both faithfully followed and renewed for the specific needs of the hero under consideration. In some cases, moreover, the biblical authors, counting on their audience's familiarity with the features and function of the type-scene, could merely allude to the type-scene or present a transfigured version of it.[724]

What might these conventions and type-scenes by the authors of the Samson stories be intended to do? As argued here and elsewhere, Samson symbolizes Israel, since both are chosen by Yhwh and ultimately rely upon Yhwh for their lives and wellbeing.[725] Despite the miraculous destruction of the Philistines through the spirit of Yhwh, Samson never mentions Yhwh in his cavalier victory speech, but instead complains to the deity of his imminent death. Likewise, despite the miraculous destruction of Pharoah and his army by Yhwh and freedom from Egyptian bondage, the Israelites complain of their pending death to Moses and Yhwh in the wilderness. However, as Greenstein notes, the Samson stories do not simply personify Israel—as though there was one hidden meaning to be uncovered—but rather it a deeper meaning, among others, within the text, one that is especially prominent when it is read alongside the rest of the DH, since Samson, like Israel, maintains both a complicated and delicate relationship with Yhwh.[726] The end of

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[724] Alter, *Art of Biblical*, 60, 69.

[725] On the form and function of the "nation of Israel" as a character in the wilderness traditions, see Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel – National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40–64. On Samson symbolizing the people of Israel, see Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson"; and Mbuvi, "Samson's Body Politic."

the verse concludes, then, with a very common phrase in the DH, addressing the hearer and reader of the text as the narrator notes how En-Hakkore remains at Lehi "until this day" (Judg 15:19.[727]

The final verse of the core Samson stories is short and almost unquestionably Deuteronomistic (Judg 15:20). It is also the clearest indicator that the compositional history of the Samson stories expanded and evolved over time. Thus, the narrator concludes in the following way: "And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines, twenty years" (וישפט את־ישראל בימי פלשתים עשרים שנה).[728] The ending here is repeated nearly verbatim at the end of the next chapter (Judg 16:31) and this unique feature in the book of Judges is the most telltale signs of scribal expansion in the Samson stories.[729] Accordingly, the resumptive repetition in Judg 15:20 and 16:31 likely reveals an original ending to the core Samson stories.[730] Regarding then the different forms of the verb שפט ("to judge, govern, lead") in each ending, that is, between וישפט ("and he judged") and והוא שפט ("and he had judged"), the change of the imperfect verb in Judg 15:20 into a

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[726] Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 254–55.

[727] Childs, "Study of the Formula"; and Geoghegan, "'Until This Day'." There are numerous uses of the phrase "until this day" (עד היום הזה) in the DH (e.g., Deut 2:22; 3:14; 10:8; 34:6; Josh 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; 8:28, 29; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10; Judg 1:21, 26, 6:24; 10:4; 18:12; 1 Sam 5:5; 6:18; 27:6; 30:25; 2 Sam 4:3; 6:8; 18:18; 1 Kgs 8:8; 9:13; 9:21; 10:12; 12:19; 2 Kgs 2:22; 8:22; 10:27; 14:7; 16:6; 17:23, 34, 41).

[728] Unlike the stories of Othniel (Judg 3:11), Ehud (Judg 3:30), Deborah (Judg 5:30), and Gideon (Judg 8:28), the defeat of Israel's enemies was not followed by peace (שקט) in the land (ארץ). For more on the cyclical formula and structure in the book of Judges, see Frolov, *Judges*, 16–29.

[729] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42; and Müller, "Redactional Framework."

[730] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 42.

perfect verb with a subject pronoun in Judg 16:31 corroborates the resumptive repetition, and the twenty years in both texts tells the same period from different perspectives.[731]

As noted above, many commentators identify Judg 15:8 as the original ending to the core Samson stories (Judg 14:1–15:8), assigning Judg 15:9–20 as etiological (Judg 15:17, 19) and Deuteronomistic (Judg 15:20) additions to that original ending, along with the note about Yhwh working behind the scenes (Judg 14:4) and the appearances of the spirit of Yhwh (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14).[732] Regardless of these likely scribal revisions, the Deuteronomistic ending here (Judg 15:20) encapsulates all of the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15) with careful attention to their language and themes throughout. Therefore, in addition to the etiologies of Ramath-Lehi (Judg 15:17) and En-Hakkore (Judg 15:19), the finale of the core Samson stories is an appropriate commemoration of the heroic warrior who singlehandedly battled the archenemies of Israel by the power of Yhwh.

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, it was argued that the older, literary core of the Samson stories is Judg 14–15, which can be differentiated from the major additions of Judg 16 and Judg 13 by several distinguishable features. The first of these is the verb צלח to describe the rushing of the spirit of Yhwh upon Samson (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), something only found in other Deuteronomistic texts featuring well-known characters, namely Saul and David (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13; 18:10). The second feature listed was the absence of the Nazirite vow in the core Samson stories, despite it being central to Samson's birth

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[731] See Spronk, *Judges*, 436; and Nelson, *Judges*, 259.

[732] See, for example, Gese, "ältere Simsonüberlieferung"; Witte, "Wie Simson in den Kanon kam"; Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 190–332; Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 41–44; Kratz, *Composition*, 205; Groß, *Richter*, 89–90, 657–60; Knauf, *Richter*, 16–17, 23–25; and Paris, "Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4."

narrative (Judg 13) and a brief albeit important detail that Samson shares with Delilah (Judg 16:17). It was shown how the Nazirite vow receives no attention whatsoever in the core stories, which is surprising considering Samson repeatedly breaks the stipulations outlined to his parents by the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:4–5, 13–14), as well as those detailed to Moses by Yhwh in the book of Numbers (Num 6:1–21), even though the latter is very likely a late Priestly text and a different Nazirite vow than the one here. The third distinguishable feature explored was how Samson is not situated by the authors between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg 13:25; 16:31), nor is he identified with his father as an Israelite from the clan of Dan (Judg 13:2) as in Judg 13 and 16. In short, Samson is not explicitly identified as an Israelite in Judg 14–15. Instead, it is only "the men of Judah" who appear inside the core Samson stories when they bargain with Samson and the Philistines to turn him over to the Philistines at Lehi (Judg 15:9–11). Meanwhile, Israel is only mentioned twice in the core Samson stories, not as part of the story, but as an aside from the narrator (Judg 14:4; 15:20). Therefore, it was argued that since there is no affiliation of Samson with the clan of Dan or Israel in Judg 14–15, but only with Judah and territories on its borders, then Samson was most likely a Judahite character before he was a שפט over all Israel (Judg 15:20; 16:31) and from the clan of Dan (Judg 13:2; 16:31).

Next, the core Samson stories were read within the context of the Neo-Assyrian empire and its rule over Israel and Judah during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The chapter explored how Neo-Assyrian hegemony might have affected the composition of the Samson stories during this period in which the mighty Samson is portrayed as a solitary warrior fighting on behalf of Israel against a far more powerful overlord, the Philistines. Furthermore, this chapter asked how the collapse of the northern kingdom of

Israel and subsequent influx of Israelites and others into Judah, as well as the weakened borders with Philistia, might have informed the text's concern with intermarriage. The nature of this problem was demonstrated in the sexual innuendos exhibited in Samson's revelry with the Philistines during and after his marriage to the Timnite woman. It was argued that each of these risqué elements of wordplay in the text was a way to reinforce the underlying risk intermarriage poses for Israel in the book of Judges and the DH, as it was believed to lead to the idolatrous worship of foreign gods and the denigration of the covenant between Yhwh and Israel (e.g., Deut 7:1–6; Judg 2:11–3:6).

Accordingly, the role of master scribes in the ancient Near East was explored to understand the crucial role that language played in the cultural, political, and religious world of Israel and Judah. In particular, the chapter examined the sophisticated use of wordplay throughout the Samson stories, in which the authors employed a wide range of literary and rhetorical devices, such as assonance, irony, puns, repetition, riddles, and rhyme. It was argued that being allies, enemies, and/or vassals of the great empires to the north (Assyria, Babylon, Persia) and south (Egypt) of Israel and Judah meant that the activity of these master scribes was important for understanding the ways in which biblical scribes were also preserving their own textual traditions, displaying mastery of their own native tongue, and exhibiting religious and social power through sophisticated wordplay in these imperial contexts. It was argued that this command of language was a type of narrative resistance and form of linguistic contact between master scribes whose compositions reflected the dynamic cultural, religious, and social realities in Israel and Judah in opposition to their far larger, richer, and stronger overlords.

To better understand the use of wordplay by the authors of the Samson stories, two primary categories from ancient Greek rhetoric were utilized: paronomasia and polysemy. The prevalence of these types of sophisticated wordplay were shown in every section of the core Samson stories, along with folkloric features drawn from their oldest oral and literary traditions. In so doing, it was shown how the authors of the Samson stories appeared to have kept one eye on the folkloric tales of a heroic warrior from the northern Shephelah and another on the looming shadow of the Neo-Assyrian empire during the seventh century BCE.

In the end, it was argued that the battle of brains and brawn between the lowly Samson and the powerful Philistines provided a fitting allegory for the struggle between the vassal kingdom of Judah and its overlord Assyria. Furthermore, it was argued how this type of political and religious satire would not only have been entertaining but also foreboding for Israelites and Judahites after the destruction of Israel and the decimation of most of Judah at the end of the eighth century BCE. Such clever and complex cultural resistance was demonstrated in Samson's deadly bout of *lex talionis* with the Philistines.

While many of Samson's most famed characteristics and qualities in these core stories—whether for good or for ill—carry on into the final chapter, the direction and tone of the Samson stories evolve from an uncontrollable and unstoppable warrior to a tragic, fallen hero, who loses everything in the arms of his lover and in the hands of his enemies, as he fulfills a dark and disastrous destiny.

CHAPTER FOUR:

SAMSON DIES FOR ISRAEL (JUDGES 16)

4.1. Introduction

In Milton's only published tragedy, *Samson Agonistes* (*SA*), which he referred to

as his "dramatic poem," Samson is blinded, imprisoned, and left to ruminate over his

tragic fall from grace.[733] Locked away in the dungeons of Gaza, and forced "to labour as

in a common workhouse," Milton's Samson cries out to his God: "O loss of sight, of thee

I must complain! Blind among enemies, O worse than chains" (*SA* 67–68). Samson

proceeds to meditate upon his defeat and the ways in which he failed to obey the God

who had granted him immense power to deliver Israel from her enemies (*SA* 40, 225,

274, 1214). In an example of art imitating life, Milton's personal blindness, brief

imprisonment, political resistance, and social downfall in seventeenth century England is

reflected throughout this masterfully composed tragedy.[734] Milton's play, of course, is

based on the biblical Samson stories, focusing on the blinding, imprisonment, and death

of Samson among the Philistines from Gaza (Judg 16:21–31). However, before this

violent betrayal and tragic turn of events happen to Samson in the biblical account,

Samson gets the best of the "Gazites" (עזתים) who fail to capture him while sleeping with

a sex worker (זנה) in their fortified city (Judg 16:1–3). Yet, all things must come to an

end, including Samson's ability to escape from the Philistines time and time again. Thus,

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[733] John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, The John Milton Reading Room, 25 May 2023, http://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/samson/drama/text.shtml.

[734] Laura L. Knoppers, "'England's Case': Contexts of the 1671 Poems," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 571–88.

Samson is allured, captured, and exiled back to Gaza by the hands of his mysterious love, Delilah, and his relentless enemies, the "Philistine lords" (סרני פלשתים), whose divine and human victory proves to be tragically short lived (Judg 16:4–31).

This chapter focuses on the first major addition to the Samson stories (Judg 16), reading it against the attacks on Judah and Jerusalem (598; 597; 587 BCE), their final destruction, and the subsequent exile of the Judean elite during the Neo-Babylonian period.[735] These stories are divided here into three acts. The first act narrates Samson's humiliation of the "Gazites" (Judg 16:1–3), the second tells of Delilah's betrayal and the Philistine lords' capture of Samson (Judg 16:4–21), and the third concludes with Samson's miraculous albeit tragic triumph over the Philistines in the temple of Dagon (Judg 16:22–31). There are two main themes interwoven throughout these final Samson stories, both of which arguably become central, even if at times opposed, in the DH during the exilic period: tragedy and triumph.[736]

In that vein, a new reading of Samson's nighttime escape from the Gazites surrounding him (Judg 16:1–3) will be proposed by drawing a direct literary connection with another nocturnal flight from an encroaching enemy of Judah, the Neo-Babylonian army (2 Kgs 25:1–6). Next, at the end of the Samson and Delilah story, it will be argued that Deuteronomistic scribes transformed the character of Samson from a solitary warrior

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[735] See Lipschitz and Blenkinsopp, *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian*; and Lipschitz, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah Under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005); Avraham Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation*, ABS 18 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012); Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*, CHANE 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Michael Jursa, "The Neo-Babylonian Empire," in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. V (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 91–137.

[736] For the establishment of these themes in the DH, see Hoppe, "Strategy of the Deuteronomistic History"; and Knoppers, "History as Confession?"

fighting on behalf of Israel into the tragic final judge whose capture, blinding, and exile (Judg 16:21) foreshadows the fate of Judah's final king (2 Kgs 25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11). By connecting the downfalls of Samson and Zedekiah, especially following the traumatic loss of the Judean land and people to the Neo-Babylonian empire, it will be argued that the Deuteronomists elevated Samson to a more prominent place in the DH with its new reflection upon the failed political and religious institutions of Judah.[737] In so doing, it will be shown how Samson functions as a transitional figure who anticipates the strengths and weaknesses of Israel's most notable kings, ultimately becoming a harbinger of what Noth called the "great final catastrophes" that befell Judah and the monarchy.[738]

Many of the Deuteronomistic features from Judg 14–15 continue into Judg 16, such as fear of foreign women (Judg 14:1–15:8; 16:1–21), the summary of a judge's reign (Judg 15:20; 16:31), and the leitmotif of sight and (dis)obedience (Judg 14:1–3; 16:1, 21, 28), while new ones occur, such as the opposition of Yhwh with other gods (Judg 16:23–24) and the shared fate between the last judge and final king of the DH (Judg 16:21; 2 Kgs 25:7).[739] Each of these features are part and parcel of the textual development of the book of Judges and DH, all of which likely emerged from difficult socio-political contexts memorializing Israel's tumultuous entry and exit from the promised land. If the promises of Yhwh in the DH were contingent upon the people of Israel "doing what is right and good in the eyes of Yhwh" (Deut 6:18; 12:28), then Samson represents the antithesis to that Deuteronomic standard as the ultimate blind and

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[737] Hoppe, "Strategy of the Deuteronomistic History."

[738] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 145. Cf. Knoppers, "From Israel to Judah."

[739] Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists."

failed leader at the end of his life—teaching Israel precisely what not to do.[740] Which

parts of the stories were older oral and textual traditions about Samson, which were

written by Deuteronomistic scribes, and which were the latest additions to the text are

some of the issues explored below. The distinct features throughout the ending of the

Samson stories (Judg 16) are distinguished, then, from those in the earlier core stories

(Judg 14–15) and those in the later birth narrative (Judg 13). Furthermore, if there is a

direct connection between the tragic fates of Samson and Zedekiah (Judg 16:21; 2 Kgs

25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11), then most, perhaps all, of Judg 16, along with other parts of the

book of Judges, were very likely composed during or after the Neo-Babylonian exile of

Judah.[741]

Two primary questions are therefore addressed in this chapter. First, how might

Neo-Babylonian culture and dominance have affected the composition of the Samson

stories, particularly the extensive use of wordplay by the authors? Second, why might

Yhwh's triumph over Dagon and the Philistines have ultimately come through the tragic

capture, defeat, and death of Samson (Judg 16:21–31)? Before directly addressing these

questions, an examination of the distinguishing features in Judg 16 will help situate it in

relation to the other chapters at the beginning (Judg 13) and middle (Judg 14–15) of the

Samson stories, as well as contextualize the text within the broader language and themes

of the DH after the exile of Judah.

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[740] Sight is a consistent theme throughout the Samson stories and the DH, which is perhaps why, for example, rabbis noted that "Samson rebelled using his eyes" (t.Sot 3:15 L.) and "Samson followed his eyes, therefore the Philistines gouged them out" (Sotah 1:8). See, also, Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*, 201–13.

[741] Reinhard Müller, "Images of Exile in the Book of Judges," in *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and Its Historical Contexts*, ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin, BZAW 404 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 229–40.

4.2. Distinguishing Features of Judges 16

One of the most distinguishing features in the final chapter of the Samson stories is the absence of the "spirit of Yhwh," which was central to the core texts and presented as the reason why Samson could rip apart a young lion in Timnah (Judg 14:6), kill thirty armed Philistines in Ashkelon (Judg 14:19), and defeat one thousand Philistines in Lehi with the jawbone of an ass (Judg 15:14–15). Even Yhwh alone is only mentioned twice in this chapter. The first time is a note by the narrator that Yhwh departed from Samson after his hair is shaved (Judg 16:20) and the second time is when Samson prays to Yhwh for his strength to return so he can carry out vengeance upon the Philistines (Judg 16:28). The implication of both verses is to explain the underlying source of Samson's strength, which earlier allowed him to break free from the different forms of bondage by Delilah. Thus, after Yhwh departs Samson, he is weak and finally captured by the Philistines (Judg 16:21). However, despite Samson's successful escape from each of Delilah's restraints, his incredible strength is never explicitly linked to the "spirit of Yhwh," nor from a spontaneous, divine rush of power, as in the core texts.

Instead, Samson's strength is explicitly linked with the next distinguishing feature in the story, which is that Samson's hair is the source of his power (Judg 16:13, 17, 22). Samson says that if his hair is restricted (Judg 16:13) or removed (Judg 16:17) that his strength will leave him, revealing to Delilah: "I will become weak and be like all men" (וחליתי והייתי ככל־האדם).[742] Diachronically, it is argued here that Samson is first identified

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[742] The second half of Judg 16:13 in the MT may be defective and an example of *homoioteleuton*. The text is therefore substituted by many commentators and translations with the LXX[B] that reads as follows: "[…] and hammer them into the wall with the peg, I shall also become like one of men, weak" (καὶ ἐγκρούσῃς τῷ πασσάλῳ εἰς τὸν τοῖχον, καὶ ἔσομαι ὡς εἷς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀσθενής). For a different interpretation, see Spronk, who argues that the missing text in the MT is a stylistic decision by the author to heighten the tension in the story and augment Delilah's feverish character (*Judges*, 441–42).

as a Nazirite in this final chapter (Judg 16:17), explaining why Samson's hair is so long

and the source of his power or strength (כח). The Nazirite vow in Judg 16:17 is seen by

some scholars as an interpolation by the authors of the birth narrative to shift the source

of Samson's strength from his hair to Yhwh working through the Nazirite vow.[743] If this

were true, however, then Samson would repeatedly break the stipulations outlined to his

parents by the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:4–5, 13–14), as well as those detailed to

Moses by Yhwh (Num 6:1–21), which most scholars consider a late Priestly text and a

different Nazirite vow than the one in the Samson stories.[744] Therefore, the most likely

reason for portraying Samson's single requirement as a Nazirite to not shave his hair here

(Judg 16:17) compared to the requirements in the birth narrative and book of Numbers

(Num 6:1–21) is that it is an older form of the Nazirite vow reserved for special prophets

(1 Sam 1:11; Amos 2:10–11) or holy warriors preparing for battle (cf. Deut 32:42; Judg

5:2).[745] Niditch elaborates on the Nazirite vow in her study on hair in the Bible:

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[743] See Kratz, *Composition*, 208; Jonker, *Exclusivity and Variety*, 127–33, 166; and Meurer, *Simson-Erzählungen*, 102–04.

[744] Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 215–26, 229–35; Stipp, "Simson, der Nasiräer,"; Lemardelé, "Samson le *nazir*"; and Niditch, '*My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man*,' 81–94.

[745] Niditch, '*My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man*,' 63–80; Lemardelé, "Être *nazir*"; and Smith, *Poetic Heroes*, 224.

Formulaic language concerning the razor not going upon the head (Numbers 6:5) is found in tales of Samson (Judges 13:5; 16:17) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11). Perhaps most remarkable and surprising about Numbers 6, however, is that women as well as men can participate in being of "consecrated status" and that men and women can choose to bear this status. No divine charisma descends nor is a special quality implicit in being the child of a barren mother. This places Numbers 6 in strong contrast to tales of Samson and Samuel and to Amos's juxtaposition of the Nazir with the prophet, called by God. There is no hint of warrior status or political leadership. The term *pr'* is employed here as in Judges 5:2 and Deuteronomy 32:42, but rather than being linked to the male warrior's prowess, the long hair is linked to a temporary immersion into the sacred (Numbers 6:12, 13). To be sure, holy warriors upon whom the divine spirit descends are also immersed in holiness, but in the case of a Samson or a Samuel this descent is not a matter of an optional ritual status assumed by the would-be holy person. Its sudden, God-sent explosiveness is a kind of warrior's frenzy; in Number 6, matters are much more controlled. The Nazirite vow has the effect of domesticating, democratizing, or generalizing the possibility of Nazirite status. One need be able only to take the vow.[746]

One of the other distinguishing features in Judg 16 is the absence of animals, which permeate Judg 14–15. Thus, in the core Samson stories, animals inhabit most scenes, whether linguistically or physically, including a young lion (Judg 14:5, 8–9, 18), a swarm of bees (Judg 14:8), a heifer (Judg 14:18), hundreds of foxes (Judg 15:4–5), the jawbone of an ass (Judg 15:15), and a partridge spring (Judg 15:19). Each of these animals play into the folkloric features of the core Samson stories, in which Samson is portrayed like an ancient Near Eastern *laḥmu* ("wild man") through his close relationship with nature in general and animals in particular, such as Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh, or as Gunkel identified him, the Israelite *Naturmensch* ("natural man") over against the Philistine *Kulturmenschen* ("cultural men").[747] Yet, no animals make an appearance in

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[746] Niditch, '*My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man*,' 84.

the final Samson stories, likely indicating a different literary tradition and possibly the

hand of another author.[748]

One of the other distinguishing features is the appearance of the "lords of the

Philistines" (סרני פלשתים), who are active throughout the chapter, conspiring with Delilah

to capture Samson (Judg 16:5, 8, 18) and offering a great sacrifice to Dagon (Judg 16:23)

alongside a blinded and enslaved Samson forced to amuse three-thousand Philistines

(Judg 16:27). The origin and meaning of the word סרן ("lord, prince, ruler, tyrant") and

its possible role in Philistine culture and polity is a widely debated subject.[749] It has often

been argued that the term derived from the Greek title τύραννος ("tyrant")—despite the

different initial consonant in Hebrew—that was brought over from Mycenaean society by

the Philistines migrating across the Aegean in the twelfth-century BCE.[750] Yet, a more

convincing case has been made for the origin of the word from the Neo-Hittite polities in

Anatolia, with which Philistine language and culture became entangled, leading to a

transfer from the Luwian term *tarwanis* to both the Greek *tyrannos* and Hebrew *seren*,

each of which shares the similar meaning of "leader" or "ruler."[751] The biblical authors

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[747] Gunkel, "Simpson," 39–44; Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero"; and Mobley, "Wild Man in the Bible." See, also, Gunkel, *Folktale in the Old Testament*, 51–70; Niditch, "Folklore and the Hebrew Bible"; and Sherman, "Hebrew Bible and the 'Animal Turn.'"

[748] The only possible exception are the seven fresh "bowstrings" or "cords" (יתרים) used by Delilah to tie Samson's hands (Judg 16:7–8), which may have been made from animal intestines.

[749] Alexander Zuckerman, "Titles of 7th Century BCE Philistine Rulers and Their Historical-Cultural Background," *BiOr* 68 (2011): 465–71; Aren M. Maeir, Brent Davis, and Louise A. Hitchcock, "Philistine Names and Terms Once Again: A Recent Perspective," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 4 (2016): 334–36; Melchert, "Iron Age Luvian," 343–44; and Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 195–98.

[750] For the *tet/samek* alteration in the titles *seren* and *tyrannos*, see Frank Moore Cross, "Inscriptions in Phoenician and other Scripts," in *Ashkelon I: Introduction and Overview (1985–2006)*, ed. Lawrence E. Stager, J. David Schloen, and Daniel M. Master (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 333–49.

almost always use the word סרנ in reference to the Philistine "lords" or "rulers" and only

in Deuteronomistic texts (Josh 13:3; Judg 3:3; 16:5, 8, 18, 23, 27; 1 Sam 5:8, 11; 6:4, 12,

16, 18; 7:7; 29:2, 6, 7; cf. 1 Chr 12:20).[752] While these Philistine rulers are central to the

capture and tragic death of Samson (Judg 16:4–31), they are nowhere to be seen in the

rest of the Samson stories. This is surprising since Samson causes serious trouble in two

of the major Philistine cities, Ashkelon (Judg 14:19) and Gaza (Judg 16:1–3), where

these Philistine rulers presumably resided according to the biblical authors (Josh 13:3). It

is possible that according to the authors of the Samson stories it is the cumulative acts of

destruction by Samson against the Philistines that eventually required the Philistine lords

to intervene and quell Samson. However, one would think that the death of thirty armed

men in Ashkelon, a thousand more in Lehi, and most, if not all, of the agrarian economy

in Timnah burnt to a crisp would have encouraged them to act sooner in the story.

One of the other distinguishable features is directly related to the Philistine lords,

which is the appearance of the deity, Dagon, in the story (Judg 16:23). As noted above,

according to the archaeological record and comparative texts from the ancient Near East,

there is no evidence for the worship of Dagon by the Philistines. That association entirely

lies within the realm of the biblical authors (Judg 16:21–30; 1 Sam 5:1–7; 1 Chr 10:8–10;

1 Macc 10:82–85; 11:4). This is perhaps surprising since Dagon—where he is known as

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[751] Zuckerman, "Titles of 7th Century," 465; Maeir, Davis, and Hitchcock, 'Philistine Names," 334; Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1*, 195–96. Melchert, however, argues that "Luvian *tarrawann(i)-* referring to persons is in origin an adjective meaning 'just, righteous', secondarily used as an honorific epithet 'the just/ righteous one' like 'hero'. It refers to a moral quality just like the homonymous abstract *tarrawann(i)-*, whose meaning is assured by its equivalence to Phoenician *ṣdq*. Neither has anything directly to do with the office of judge or ruler" ("Iron Age Luvian," 344).

[752] The one exception to "lords" or "rulers" is the description of the "bronze axles" (וסרני נחשת) in Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 7:30).

Dagan (^{d}*da-gan* or ^{d}*da-ga-an*)—is a prominent deity in the pantheon of other Middle

Euphrates and Northwest Semitic kingdoms, such as Ebla, Mari, Emar, and Ugarit.[753]

With an extensive background across Mesopotamia and the Levant, it is understandable

why Dagon was featured by the biblical authors as the national deity of the Philistines.

But according to the archaeological record, particularly around the thoroughly excavated

site of Ashdod, the Philistines appear to have primarily worshiped a female deity, a

goddess whom scholars conveniently refer to as "Ashdoda," with Dagon nowhere to be

found.[754] The Ashdoda are distinct from other cultic paraphernalia in the Levant and

share many features with seated goddesses from Mycenae and Cyprus, strengthening the

scholarly consensus that the Philistines primarily derived from Aegean cultures.[755] It is

not clear why the biblical authors portrayed Dagon as the principal god of the Philistines,

but Dagon's characterization in the DH as powerless before Yhwh is unmistakable, seen,

for example, through Samson's destruction of his temple in Gaza (Judg 16:30) and his

ruin before the ark of Elohim and/or Yhwh in Ashdod (1 Sam 5:1–7). Mark Enemali

notes how the presence of divinity within physical objects throughout the ancient near

East, such as the cultic statues of deities, was believed to have existed "between the deity

and its image after the rites of the divinization of the image," and that in the DH there

also was "a bond between Yhwh and the ark as Yhwh's dwelling place."[756] Yet, what is

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[753] See Singer, "Towards the Image"; Crowell, "Development of Dagan"; Feliu, *The God Dagan*; Emanuel, "'Dagon our God'"; and Sala, "Beyond Dagon."

[754] Amihai Mazar, "Temples and Cult," 223–24; Ehrlich, "Philistine Religion," 39–40; Russell, "Deconstructing Ashdoda"; and Sala, "Beyond Dagon," 364–65.

[755] Assaf Yasur-Landau, "The Mother(s) of All Philistines: Aegean Enthroned Deities of the 12th–11th Century Philistia," in *Potnia: Deities and Religion in the Aegean Bronze Age*, ed. Robert Laffineur and Robin Hägg, Aegaeum 22 (Liège: Université de Liège, 2001), 329–43.

distinctive in Deuteronomistic theology is how Yhwh requires faithful obedience to him

to maintain that bond and he will act contrary to expectations, including the defeat of his

own people, when it is exploited.[757] This is most likely why the ark is initially captured

by the Philistines in the book of Samuel (1 Sam 4:10–11) because the Israelites assume

victory by removing the ark from Shiloh and placing it onto the battlefield (1 Sam 4:3),

and why, on the other hand, Samson eventually regains his divine strength and is able to

destroy Dagon because he finally prays to Yhwh for its return (Judg 16:28).

The final distinguishable feature noted here is the appearance of Samson's family,

who bury him in the tomb of his father Manoah in the land between Zorah and Eshtaol

(Judg 16:31; cf. Judg 2:9; 8:32; 10:2, 5; 12:7, 10, 12, 15). According to Bloch-Smith,

familial tombs were common in ancient Israel, however, unlike the many generations of

family members buried together in the Bible, the amount of people interred were actually

small in number with only up to four generations.[758] Moreover, ancestral burial was not

tied to land claims or boundary markers, seen, for example, with the death of Joshua

(Josh 24:30; Judg 2:9), but rather tied to the residence of the one buried (e.g., Judg 8:32;

16:31; 2 Sam 2:32), especially since tombs were often grouped together within incaved

cemeteries and not scattered across the land on personal plots.[759] Accordingly, Zev Farber

argues that the "principle of *Ortsgebundenheit* (lit., "localness") pushes us to consider

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[756] See Mark Enemali, "Divine Presence in the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Samuel 4:1b–7:1," in *God and Gods in the Deuteronomistic* History, ed. Corrine Carvalho and John L. McLaughlin, CBQI 2 (Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2021), 104–26 [pp. 125–26].

[757] Enemali, "Divine Presence in the Ark," 126.

[758] Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Death and Burial, Bronze and Iron Age," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology*, ed. Daniel M. Master (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[759] Bloch-Smith, "Death and Burial."

local burial traditions as the oldest and most grounded, as they are tied to a specific community that revered the figure."[760] Yet, while Samson's burial in a family tomb is not surprising in the story, the appearance of "his brothers and all his father's house" is unexpected, as is the revelation of his father's death and his name (Manoah), as those details are missing in the earlier core stories (Judg 14–15). The use of Manoah's name in the later birth narrative (Judg 13) most likely was drawn then from this detail at the end of the Samson stories. The fact that the name of Samson's mother is not mentioned in the core Samson stories, nor does she even appear at the end of his life, likely explains why her name is also missing from the birth narrative, since it was never provided in all the Samson stories that composed earlier.

Several of these features that distinguish Judg 16 from Judg 14–15, such as the absence of the spirit of Yhwh and the introduction of the Philistine lords, Nazirite vow, and Dagon, were most likely influenced by the *Sitz im Leben* of their composition after the destruction of Judah and the exile of Judeans to Babylon at the beginning of the sixth century BCE.[761] These new features in the story fit within the larger Deuteronomistic framework, since the DH likely evolved from a salvation history during the preexilic period into a tragic history during the exilic and postexilic periods.[762] What, then, was the

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[760] Zev Farber, "Snippets from a Lost Joshua Cycle," in *"Now it Happened in Those Days" Studies in Biblical, Assyrian, and Other Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Mordechai Cogan on His 75th Birthday*, Vol. 1, ed. Amitai Baruchi-Unna et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 47. Farber proceeds to quote Martin Noth, who wrote that "A grave tradition usually gives the most reliable indication of the original provenance of a particular figure of tradition" (Farber, "Snippers," 47). The quotation is taken from Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. B.W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 169–70.

[761] For the DH during the Neo-Babylonian period, see Römer, *So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 107–64; and Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 272–359.

[762] See Nelson, "Double Redaction"; Römer, *So-Called*; Knoppers, "From Israel to Judah;" and Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists." While Person argues that the overall framework of the

socio-political situation in Judah leading up to the sixth century BCE that made the ending of the Samson stories particularly fitting for what Noth infamously described as the "great historical catastrophes" for Judah in the Bible?[763] Furthermore, how did the exile function as the interpretive lens through which many Deuteronomistic texts were composed and edited, and then eventually received?

4.3. Historical Criticism of Judges 16

For some scholars, such as Hans Barstad, the exile of Judah was an unfortunate but understandable response to a rebellious vassal state by an empire dependent upon imported commodities from its various conquered provinces.[764] Barstad notes how city-states and their local rulers were the necessary pieces in a complex tributary system run by whichever empire was in power. According to Barstad, such a system was pragmatic, as the city-states provided "indirect rule" for the empire as they controlled and taxed the conquered province on behalf of the empire, while "intervention or control in one form or another, to varying degrees, of course, was always necessary."[765] However, much of the

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Deuteronom(ist)ic History took shape in the exilic and postexilic periods, he acknowledges that its roots and sources were preexilic (Person, Jr., *Deuteronomic School*, 25–29).

There are many scholars who argue that the Enneateuch was formed by the combination of a "salvation history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) in Genesis–Joshua with a "history of calamities" (*Unheilsgeschichte*) in Judges–Kings, narrating a grand story from the creation of the world to the loss of the land temple. See Gertz, "Literature of the Old Testament."

[763] Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 145.

[764] Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the "Exilic" Period*, Symbolae Osloenses 28 (Oslo: Scandanavian University Press, 1996). Cf. Oded Lipschits, "Where Is the 'Myth of the Empty Land' To Be Found?" in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2003), 55–74.

[765] Hans M. Barstad, "Empire! '… and gave him a seat above the seats of the other kings who were with him in Babylon.' Jeremiah 52.31–34: Fact or Fiction?" in *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond: A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking*, ed. Marjo C. A. Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe, LHBOTS 616 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 19. Cf. Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Judah in the Shadow of Babylon," *HeBAI* 9 (2020): 4–19.

archaeological and textual evidence also works against that indifferent conclusion when the survivors of the exile are the primary focus of study rather than its perpetrators, and whose "necessary" practices quickly appear far less so. In the concluding chapter of the book of Lamentations, for example, the Judean poet cries out to Yhwh in utter despair, evoking the dark realities of the life for many survivors after the violent destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II and the Neo-Babylonian army:

> Remember, O Lord, what has happened; see our disgrace. Our inheritance has been given over to strangers and our homes to aliens. We are fatherless orphans. Or our mothers are grieving widows. Landless now we must pay for our wood and our water. We are shackled and yoked, driven like beasts, weary, and have no rest. We hold out our hands to Egypt, beg bread from Assyria. Our fathers sinned by are dead, and we bear the weight of their guilt. We are ruled by the slaves of strangers, and no one can save us. We forage for food at our peril; we wander in wilderness fearing swordsmen at every step. Our skin is hot as a stove with the fever of famine. Women in Zion are raped, and Judah's virgins violated. Princes are hung by their hands. Elders are mocked and abused. Young men grind at the mill and boys are laden like beasts. The old men have left our gates. Our youths have forgotten their songs. The joys of our hearts are erased, and our dancers are seated in mourning. The crown on our heads has fallen. For this, for our sins, Oh, woe! Our hearts are sick. Our eyes are dim with tears. Jackals prowl Mount Zion, a ruin now and a wasteland. (Lam 5:1–18)[766]

As seen in the lamentation above, the severity and significance of the exile is almost unfathomable for those who bore the biggest brunt of its damage, something also experienced today in the lives of those facing forced migration and the traumatic loss of their land, people, and identity.[767] It is therefore not surprising that the fall of Jerusalem and the desolation of its temple and city walls became the central theme to many of the

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[766] This translation is taken from David R. Slavitt, *The Book of Lamentations – A Meditation and Translation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 82–85.

[767] See Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 27–73; and David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience – The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 67–90.

prophets, psalmists, and storytellers of Judah, producing iconic imagery like the suffering

servant in Isaiah, the weeping prophet in Jeremiah, and the exiles singing by the rivers of

Babylon in Psalms. Many of the stories in the DH are no different, reflecting what David

Janzen identifies as "literature of trauma," that is, narratives trying to make sense of the

traumatic experience of the Judean exile and the violent destruction of Judah without

succumbing to some of its overly assured convictions concerning blessings and curses.[768]

Noth himself argued that the exile was the sole reason for the Dtr to collect and compose

the DH in the first place.[769] How, then, did the Neo-Assyrian empire fall and the Neo-

Babylonian empire rise to bring about this calamity in Judah?

At the beginning of the seventh century BCE, and following multiple revolts

against Assyria, Babylonian rebels captured the son of Sennacherib, Ashur-nadin-shumi,

and gave the Neo-Assyrian prince to invaders who took him south into Elam, where he

eventually died, likely by torture.[770] In response, Sennacherib battled Babylonia for five

years, and eventually destroyed Babylon and its resident gods and deported the royal

family back to Assyria.[771] In perhaps an even more significant act, what some scholars

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[768] David Janzen, *The Violent Gift: Trauma's Subversion of the Deuteronomistic History's Narrative*, LHBOTS 561 (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

[769] Thus, Noth wrote the following: "His whole attitude is obviously shaped by the view that Israel, once settled in Palestine, slowly but surely brought upon itself its final rejection and therefore its downfall because of its repeated apostasy. Dtr. then, seeing the fall of Jerusalem, not unjustly, as the final act in a long historical drama, thought that the time had come to collect the extant traditions concerning the history of his people, to edit them into a single work and to make an interpretation of the whole, which considered the historical process in the light of its outcome and thus could contribute to an understanding of the situation in his own time. With the final historical catastrophes in view, Dtr. consistently develops the idea of ever-intensifying decline throughout his work; and this is a further support for the thesis that Dtr.'s work is a unity in content and form and that it was all written at the same time, after the fall of Jerusalem." Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 122.

[770] Eckart Frahm, *Assyria – The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2023), 216–19.

call "godnapping," Sennacherib removed the statue of Marduk from Babylon during the ancient and revered Akitu Festival and took it back with him to Nineveh in 689 BCE.[772] In due course, Sennacherib chose his son, Esarhaddon, to be heir to the throne, thereby angering his older and very popular son, Urdu-Mullissu, which led to a rebellion and act of patricide, in which Sennacherib was murdered by Urdu-Mullissu, possibly alongside a younger brother named Sharru-usur (cf. 2 Kgs 19:37), inside the temple of the moon god at Nineveh. Nevertheless, Esarhaddon was able to muster an army large enough to defeat the forces of Urdu-Mullissu and proceeded to execute his rebellious brothers' family and followers after ascending to the throne. To restore peace and prosperity in the Babylonian region of the empire, Esarhaddon began to rebuild the city of Babylon.[773]

This project was continued by his oldest son and royal heir, Ashurbanipal, who famously began his long reign in 668 BCE by setting up a new statue of Marduk in the Esagil Temple in Babylon, which had been removed twenty years earlier by his father.[774] However, as Qohelet mused, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Qoh 1:9). Therefore, Ashurbanipal's older brother and vassal king over Babylonia, Shamash-shumu-ukin, along with numerous regional allies, rebelled against his younger brother in 652 BCE, only to be defeated at the hands of Ashurbanipal and his army in 648 BCE.[775] According

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[771] Thus, in the *bit akīti* inscription, Sennacherib is portrayed saying: "after I destroyed Babylon, smashed its gods, (and) put its people to the sword, I removed its earth in order to make the site of that city unrecognizable and I had (it) carried to the sea by the Euphrates River" (RINAP 3/2 168: 11. 36b–39).

[772] Frahm, *Assyria*, 225–32; and Shana Zaia, "State-Sponsored Sacrilege: "Godnapping" and Omission in Neo-Assyrian Inscriptions," *JANEH* 2 (2015): 19–54.

[773] Frahm, *Assyria*, 232–34.

[774] Frahm, *Assyria*, 259.

[775] Frahm, *Assyria*, 280–85.

to Ashurbanipal's self-portrayal, the Neo-Assyrian empire and his incredibly strong reign flourished and remained stable in Mesopotamia for the next twenty years until his death in 627 BCE.[776] Yet, once the Neo-Assyrian empire's longest reigning monarch died, the empire struggled to maintain order, and an enigmatic leader named Nabopolassar took the throne in Babylon, raged war against Assyria, and captured the capital of Nineveh in 612 BCE with the help of the Median army, thereby ending the Neo-Assyrian empire's more than three-hundred-year rule over Western Asia.[777]

The fall of Assyria and destruction of Nineveh sent shockwaves throughout the empire, something even seen in the writings from the small province of Judah, in which Nahum gleefully declared that those "who look upon you shall flee and say how utterly Nineveh is ruined, but no one will be saddened or surprised. No one will offer comfort to you" (Nah 3:7), and Zephaniah forebodingly prophesied that Yhwh will "destroy Assyria and he will make Nineveh a desert wasteland" (Zeph 2:13).[778] With the fall, then, of the Neo-Assyrian empire, what led to the Neo-Babylonian attacks on Judah at the end of the seventh century BCE and the final destruction and exile of Jerusalem in 587 BCE?

During the battles with the Babylonians and Medes, the Assyrians had formed an alliance with the Egyptians in exchange for territory in the western parts of the empire.

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[776] Frahm, *Assyria*, 273–300.

[777] Frahm, *Assyria*, 327–336. Regarding the identity of Nabopolassar, who initiated the rebellion in 626 BCE and became the king of Babylon, Jursa notes that he "can with some plausibility be identified as the Assyrian governor of the southern city of Uruk. He was the descendant of a locally important family that had traditionally served the Assyrians and owned land and temple offices in Uruk. In his own inscriptions, Nabopolassar claimed to be the 'son of nobody': this would be owed to his need to not draw attention to his family's history. Additional circumstantial evidence may suggest that this family was Dakkurean, that is, of Chaldean tribal origin, at least in the eyes of contemporaries from northern Babylonia." Jursa, "Neo-Babylonian," 98–99.

[778] These translations are taken from David R. Slavitt, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84, 99.

Following their defeat of the Assyrians and rise to power, Nabopolassar and his son, the

crown prince Nebuchadnezzar II, fought to regain those provinces from Egypt. These

wars came to a head at the battles of Carchemish (606 BCE) and Hama (605 BCE), in

which King Nebuchadnezzar II and the Babylonian army were ultimately victorious over

Pharoah Neco and the Egyptian army, something that was even mentioned in the Bible

(Jer 46:2; 2 Chr 35:20). After the death of his father, Nebuchadnezzar II assumed

kingship over Babylon and began a series of military campaigns throughout the Levant,

annexing and destroying territories along the Mediterranean coast, including Judah,

which once again became a vassal state, but this time to Babylonia.[779] Due to the

acceptance of empty promises made by Egypt for military support and political

independence, King Jehoiakim of Judah refused to pay his tribute to Nebuchadnezzar,

starting a failed and short-lived rebellion against the empire that eventually led to the

destruction of Jerusalem and its hinterland and the deportation of the Judean elite—such

as Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim and his royal replacement—to Babylon in 597 BCE.

Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiakim's brother, Zedekiah, on the throne in Jerusalem, likely

to serve as a puppet king, which nevertheless led to another rebellion by Judah against

Babylon, resulting in the final destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of even more

Judahites to Babylon in 587 BCE.[780]

   With the destruction of their capital and the temple that housed their god and

protector of their land and people, the Judahites in exile were forced to make sense of

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[779] David Vanderhooft, "Babylonian Strategies of Imperial Control in the West: Royal Practice and Rhetoric," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2003), 235–62; Beaulieu, "Judah in the Shadow"; and Jursa, "Neo-Babylonian," 99–102.

[780] Lipschitz, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 68–97.

what went wrong, especially those scribes who were able to preserve and develop the national and religious identities of the people of Israel and Judah through their texts.[781] One of the conclusions that the Deuteronomistic authors appear to have come to during and after the exile was to ascribe the fall of Judah to the failed covenant between Yhwh and Yhwh's people, something exemplified in the failed kings of Israel and Judah. This failure is repeatedly seen in Yhwh's intense anger (אף) and wrath (חמה) toward his people, which is depicted in unique ways in the final chapters of the book of Kings (2 Kgs 22:13, 17; 23:26, 27; 24:3).[782] According to the Dtr, the many great religious reforms of King Josiah (2 Kgs 23:1–25) were not enough for Yhwh to resolve his deep anger against Judah and for the sins cultivated by Manasseh (2 Kgs 23:6), resulting in Yhwh's divine declaration: "I will also remove Judah from my sight, as I have removed Israel. And I will reject this city, which I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the temple of which I said, 'My name shall be there'" (2 Kgs 23:27; cf. 2 Sam 7:8–17). As Knoppers concluded about this verse, the "text affirms the sovereign power of Yhwh to such an extent that the people's removal from their ancestral territory at the hands of their enemies may only be explained as the intended consequence of judgments rendered by the people's own patron deity."[783]

This socio-historical background in Babylon provides a likely setting for the composition of Judg 16 and reasons why Samson is placed within narratives where he is at odds with the mighty Philistine outsiders in their own city of Gaza (Judg 16:1–3) and

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[781] For more on the concepts of nationhood versus statehood and the possible political motivations underlying the formation of the Hebrew Bible, see Jacob L. Wright, *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[782] Knoppers, "History as Confession," 290–96.

[783] Knoppers, "History as Confession," 293.

the home of their (supposed) patron deity, Dagon (Judg 16:21–30). The question for the audience, then, is who will be victorious, Samson or the Philistines, Yhwh or Dagon?

4.4. Literary Criticism of Judges 16

The opening story in Judg 16 resembles Judg 14 in many ways. In both stories, Samson travels into Philistine territory and sees a woman whom he desires (Judg 14:1; 16:1), acts upon that desire through marriage (Judg 14:2–9) and/or sex (Judg 16:1), only to find himself in trouble with the local Philistines, whether in Timnah (Judg 14:10–20) or in Gaza (Judg 16:2–3).[784] Yet, many of the details in this opening tale (Judg 16:1–3) look ahead even more than behind, setting the stage for the stories of Samson and Delilah (Judg 16:4–20) and Samson's return to Gaza (Judg 16:21–30) at the end of the chapter. The beginning and end of Judg 16 create a chiastic structure, then, which works well for the literary and rhetorical dynamics of the story, despite those who question the text's compositional unity.[785]

In Judg 16:1, Samson finds himself deeper into foreign territory than usual, traveling down to the southernmost, coastal, Philistine city of Gaza, around forty-five miles southwest from his homeland between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg 13:25; 16:31).[786] The city of Gaza is used multiple times in the DH as a phrase describing long distance, with characters and the narrator often saying that so and so was "as far as Gaza" (עד־עזה) (Deut 2:23; Josh 10:41; Judg 6:4; 1 Kgs 4:24; 2 Kgs 18:8).[787] Like all the epic adventures

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[784] See Exum, "Symmetry and Balance"; and Broida, "Closure in Samson."

[785] Brettler, *Book of Judges*, 54–56.

[786] The LXX^A reads, "And Sampson went **from there** to Gaza" (Καὶ ἐπορεύθη Σαμψων **ἐκεῖθεν** εἰς Γάζαν), likely to draw stronger connection with the previous story which ended in Lehi (Judg 15:19).

[787] Butler, *Judges*, 346.

in the Samson stories, the long distance only adds to the incredible nature of Samson's

feat at the end of this ribald journey into Gaza.[788] The identification of the Philistines in

Gaza as the "Gazites" (עזתים) is only used twice in the Bible, once when Yhwh names all

the promised land yet to be possessed by Joshua, including the territory belonging to the

Philistine lords, which includes one from Gaza (Josh 13:3), and in the Samson stories

here when the "Gazites" gather together at night to try to capture Samson (Judg 16:2).

According to what is known of Iron Age Philistia, the nuanced identity of the Philistines

with their fortified, city centers here, rather than simply the generic label, "Philistine," is

a noteworthy detail about Philistine history employed by the biblical author.[789]

Unlike the woman from Timnah, Samson does not seek to marry the woman from

Gaza, but immediately sleeps with her instead (ויבא אליה), as she is a female sex-worker

(אשה זונה). The woman in Gaza is described similarly to many sex-workers in the Bible,

whether through legal (Lev 21:7; Deut 23:18), prosaic (Josh 2:1; 6:22), prophetic (Jer

3:3; Ezek 16:30), or wisdom (Prov 6:26) literature.[790] Jephthah's mother is described in

the same way as the sex-worker from Gaza (Judg 11:1) and both women are unnamed.

Furthermore, the authors do not identify either woman as Ammonite, Israelite, Philistine,

or something else, further demonstrating how the characters are quite underdeveloped.[791]

In the DH, זנה is often used to metaphorically describe the idolatrous desires and practices

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[788] Jack M. Sasson, "A Gate in Gaza: An Essay on the Reception of Tall Tales," in *Biblical Narratives, Archaeology and Historicity. Essays in Honour of Thomas L. Thompson*, ed. Emanuel Pfoh and Lukasz Niesiolowski-Spanò (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 182.

[789] Maeir, "Philistine and Israelite Identities."

[790] Camp, "Riddlers, Tricksters, and Strange Women," 120–22; and Sharp, *Irony and Meaning*, 84–124.

[791] Exum, "Samson's Women"; and Schneider, *Judges*, 217–18.

of Israel (e.g., Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33), an underlying theme for Samson who very likely symbolizes the people of Israel and will soon come to his own downfall by a foreign power for doing what is evil (Judg 2:11–23) rather than what is good in the eyes of Yhwh (Deut 6:18).

In Judg 16:2–3, we are introduced to the Gazites, who have been anonymously tipped off that Samson has come (בא) into the city, and whose simpleminded plan to capture the invincible Samson is revealed: lie in wait (ארב) all night (ליל) and surround (סבב) Samson at the gates (שער) of the city (עיר) and kill (הרג) him. There are multiple connections, both compositionally and thematically, with the language used here and with the stories about King Zedekiah of Judah. For example, four of the verbs in Judg 16:2–3 (עלה, סבב, הרג, בא) can also be found in the stories of Zedekiah's capture and downfall, while a fifth one (ארב) is in a related passage about the ambush of Babylon and its king (Jer 51:12) rather than that of Jerusalem and its king (2 Kgs 25:1–10). Moreover, the escape through the gates of the city doors at night-time and the destruction of the bars that hold them in place are also part of both stories.

Accordingly, the Babylonian army built a siege wall that surrounded (סבב) Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:1), whereupon the royal family fled the capital at night (ליל) through the southern gate (שער) of the city (עיר) near the king's garden (2 Kgs 25:4), but were nevertheless overtaken in the plains of Jericho (2 Kgs 25:5), captured, and brought up (עלה) to the king of Babylon (2 Kgs 25:6), who slaughtered (שחט), or according to the Chroniclers killed (הרג), the sons of Zedekiah (2 Kgs 25:7; 2 Chr 36:17). The king of Babylon then blinded (עור) Zedekiah, bound (אסר) him in bronze shackles (נחשת), and brought him to Babylon (2 Kgs 25:7; cf. Judg 16:21).

275

Likewise, the Philistines laid in wait (ארב) all night (ליל) to surround (סבב)

Samson at the gates (שער) of the city (עיר) to kill (הרג) him (Judg 16:2), but failed because

Samson arose in the middle of the night (ליל), seized the bar (בריח) and gates (שער) of the

city (עיר) doors, put them on his shoulders, and ascended (עלה) to the top of the mountain

facing Hebron (Judg 16:3). The language and themes used in both of these texts narrating

the downfalls of Samson, Zedekiah, and Jerusalem are considerable (עיר, סבב, ליל, הרג, בא,

שער, עלה), even more so when the oracles against Babylon are included from the book of

Jeremiah (Jer 50–51), in which Yhwh is depicted orchestrating a devastating military

ambush (ארב) against the Babylonians (Jer 51:12) as surrounding nations break the bars

(בריח) of the ancient city and burn it down to the ground (Jer 51:30). Even the earlier

name change from "Mattaniah" to "Zedekiah" by the king of Babylon (2 Kgs 24:17) with

the Hiphil of the verb סבב adds an intriguing element to the meaning-making process of

the biblical authors composing these different but related stories in the DH. Furthermore,

each of these stories essentially narrate the end of a particular form of leadership in Israel

and Judah, that is, the period of the judges and then the kings, something explored below

when looking at the death of Samson.

Yet, while the direct literary connection between the blinding, capture, and exile

of Samson and Zedekiah (Judg 16:21; 2 Kgs 25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11) has been occasionally

hinted at by commentators, its depth has not been explored deeply enough.[792] It also does

not appear that any scholar has included the story of Samson's initial journey into Gaza

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[792] For example, see Moore, *Judges*, 356–57; Legrange, *Livre des Juges*, 252; Groß, *Richter*, 726;
Butler, *Judges*, 352; Webb, *Judges*, 417; and Nelson, *Judges*, 270. One exception among the commentators
is Spronk, who gives much more attention to the literary connection between Samson and Zedekiah
(*Judges*, 18, 377, 445, 448). Cf. Lackowski, "Samson among the Deuteronomists."

(Judg 16:1–3) with their comparison to Zedekiah, particularly the narrative details leading up to his capture and punishment by the king of Babylon (2 Kgs 25:1–7). Yet, the literary aspects of each story significantly overlap, and they are characteristic of the overall language and themes found throughout the DH.[793]

Additionally, the literary connections between the Samson and Zedekiah stories are underlined with sophisticated wordplay by the authors, which relates to the Samson stories that preceded them in Judg 14–15.[794] Thus, the verb חרש is used here (Judg 16:2), as it was after Samson's language games with the Philistines (Judg 14:18). However, in Judg 16:2, the verb is in the Hithpael, producing a *hapax legomena* with the meaning of "keeping quiet." This is exactly what the Gazites intend to do, since they discuss (אמר) among themselves, somewhat comically, their plan to remain quiet "until the morning light" (עד־אור הבקר) to kill Samson. When חרש was used before, it was in proximity to the near homonym and rare word for sun (חרס), while here it is next to a different word and a different phrase for the sun, שמשון ("little sun") and הבקר אור ("morning sun"), as well as next to a word for "the night" (הלילה), which itself anticipates Delilah (דלילה) in the next scene, whose name may play on the word for night.[795] The verb describing the Gazites

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[793] For example, see the common use of the verbs ארב (Deut 19:11; Josh 8:2, 4, 7, 12, 14, 19, 21; Judg 9:25, 32, 34, 43; 16:2, 9, 12; 20:29, 33, 36–38; 21:20; 1 Sam 22:8, 13), סבב (Deut 2:1, 3; 32:10; Josh 6:3–4, 7, 11, 14–15; 7:9; 15:3, 10; 16:6; 18:14; 19:14; Judg 11:18; 18:23; 19:22; 20:5; 1 Sam 5:8–10; 7:16; 15:12, 27; 16:11; 17:30; 18:11; 22:17–18, 22; 2 Sam 3:12; 5:23; 14:20, 24; 18:15, 30; 20:12; 22:6; 1 Kgs 2:15; 5:3; 7:15, 23–24; 8:14; 18:37; 21:4; 2 Kgs 3:9, 25; 6:15; 8:21; 9:18–19; 16:18; 20:2; 23:34; 24:17; 25:1, 4, 10, 17), and אחז (Deut 32:41; Josh 22:9, 19; Judg 1:6; 12:6; 16:3, 21; 20:6; 2 Sam 1:9, 2:21; 4:10; 6:6; 20:9; 1 Kgs 1:51; 6:6, 10), among others, in the DH.

[794] Exum, "Symmetry and Balance"; and Broida, "Closure in Samson."

[795] The authors of the story may have intended multiple meanings for Delilah's name, which likely derives from the Hebrew verb דלל ("to hang, be low, languish") that figuratively means "to be weakened." This is precisely what happens to Samson after his hair is shorn; he even says the following to Delilah after revealing the source of his strength: "I will become weak and be like all men" (וחליתי והייתי ככל־האדם). The root itself (*d-l-l*) has multiple meanings in a variety of Semitic languages. For more, see Heinz-Josef Fabry,

failed attempt to lie in wait and ambush (ארב) Samson is found again when the Philistine

lords repeatedly lie in wait to ambush (ארב) Samson in Delilah's boudoir (Judg 16:9, 12).

Moreover, the verb to describe as Samson slept (שכב) through the night both is sexually

suggestive, since he is presumably still "sleeping" with the sex-worker in Gaza, and a

foreshadow of his impending death and burial in his father's tomb (Judg 16:30–31), as

שכב describes when a man dies and is said to lay down with his fathers (e.g., Gen 47:30;

Deut 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12; 1 Kgs 1:21). The verb describing how Samson seized (אחז) the

doors of the city gates in Gaza later illustrates the gruesome scene when the Philistine

lords seize (אחז), blind, and shackle Samson (Judg 16:21). Another example of literary

and rhetorical repetition is employed when Samson pulls out (נסע) the posts holding the

doors of the city gate and then later pulls out (נסע) the "pin" or "heddle stick" (יתד)

confining his seven locks of hair tightly woven into the loom by Delilah (Judg 16:14).[796]

The bar (בְּרִיחַ) that Samson pulls out and carries with him on his way out of Gaza is a

homonym with the adjective (בָּרִיחַ) that describes the destruction of Babylon like fleeing

refugees (Isa 43:13) and the fleeing serpent Leviathan (Isa 27:1) in the book(s) of Isaiah,

each of which derive from the verb ברח ("to flee").[797] The former text adds to the literary

connections between the end of the Samson stories and Judah's contest with Babylon,

while the latter further albeit indirectly empowers Samson's mythological resonance.

Once again, the theme of downward and upward movement is captured in the word עלה

as Samson ascends to the "head" or "top" (ראש) of the mountain facing Hebron, the royal

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"דַּל *dal*; דָּלַל *dālal*; דַּלָּה *dallāh*; זָלַל *zālal*," *TDOT* III:208–30. See, also, Niditch, *Judges*, 164; Spronk, *Judges*, 438; and Sasson, "Gate in Gaza," 177.

[796] Noegel, "Evil Loom," 198–200.

[797] Segert, "Paronomasia," 457.

site where David is eventually anointed king over Judah (2 Sam 2:1–4; 5:3).[798] Trent Butler notes how Samson's journey from Gaza to Hebron is forty miles long with a climb of over three-thousand feet, something depicting another epic part of the story.[799]

For these reasons, Sasson labels this Samson story (Judg 16:1–3) a "Tall Tale," and a "theomachy," whose purpose is not historical validation but a theological lesson about a seemingly unending war between the victorious God of Israel (Yhwh) and the false god or gods of others, for example, the one of the Philistines (Dagon), in which Samson plays an instrumental albeit comical role. Thus, he notes the following:

> Yet we may now ask, why insert a Tall Tale of pronounced whimsy among a series of yarns with obvious embellishments? I doubt that the intention was to invite wholesale skepticism about the whole cycle. I speculate that by positioning this particular episode within two distinctively phrased statements on Samson's tenure as judge (at 15:20 and 16:31), the narrator framed distinct panels for the Samson traditions. In the first of these (13:1 through 15:20), Samson is played like a 'comic dupe', a character (by no means hilarious) who serves as an instrument by which to carry out a divinely set agendum. […] The second panel occupies ch. 16, enfolding over three distinct settings: a Gaza brothel, Delilah's boudoir and a Gaza building. Especially in the first two of these scenes, Samson is a 'comic hero', in literary exploration a character with a supersized ego, defiant, conflicted about authority, oscillating between hubris and humility, not always self-aware and certainly not servile to consistency but in full control of destiny. Samson is nonchalant about danger and can compete with the gods for brute strength, his portraiture hardly aiming for verisimilitude or credibility. […] Samson leaves Gaza defenseless by removing its gate and God empowers him to destroy its temple. True enough, neither Hebrew nor modern historiography corroborates this take on events at Gaza. Yet, with such a heady lesson to derive from the Gaza confrontations, readers past and new might absorb even the tallest tale in the cycle without unduly dismissing the whole. Some yarns need not be true to convey truths.[800]

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[798] The word ראש likely has multiple meanings here, including the sense of political dominance. See Dahmen, "ראֹשׁ *rōʾš*," 252–56.

[799] Butler, *Judges*, 346. See, also, Sasson, "A Gate in Gaza," 180–82.

[800] Sasson, "A Gate in Gaza," 185–87.

The lesson exemplified in the Samson stories, one which is, perhaps, best understood as an allegory, is the political and theological struggle of the people of Israel and Judah to maintain and redefine their identity through their textual traditions following the tragic and traumatic loss of their land and people. And this lesson in the Samson stories is most clearly portrayed in the tragedy and triumph of Samson's downfall and death.

Accordingly, the capture and blinding of Samson eventually became one of the most well-known stories in the Bible, as demonstrated by its various depictions by artists beginning at least as early as the medieval period.[801] In a classic folkloric tale of brains versus brawn, the mighty Samson proves to be no match for the stratagems of Delilah, an enigmatic woman who lives in the Valley of Sorek and with whom Samson is said to have fallen in love (Judg 16:4; cf. Qoh 7:26).[802] Unbeknownst to Samson, Delilah strikes a deal with the Philistine lords who offer her an exorbitant bounty to subdue Israel's seemingly unbeatable strongman (Judg 16:5). When יכל ("to be able") is not used as an auxiliary verb here (cf. Gen 32:25, 28), it means to "prevail" or "overpower" and draws attention to the struggle between Samson and the Philistine lords.[803] Delilah only needs to learn the secret to Samson's incredible power to debilitate him and collect her reward. Samson seals his fate with the lurking Philistine lords when he reveals to Delilah "all his heart" (Judg 16:17).[804] The secret to "his great strength" (Judg 16:5, 6, 15) is finally

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[801] Xenia Ressos, *Samson und Delila in der Kunst von Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Petersberg: Michal Imhof, 2014).

[802] Lackowski, "Victim, Victor, or Villain?"

[803] Helmer Ringgren, "יָכֹל *yākōl*," *TDOT* VI:74–75.

[804] This figuratively may be the ultimate betrayal of Samson, since in Deuteronomistic phraseology one should only give all their heart to Yhwh (e.g., 1 Sam 12:20, 24; 1 Kgs 8:23; 14:8; 2 Kgs 10:31). Weinfeld, *Deuteornomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 334–35.

revealed to Delilah: Samson's power lies in his hair.[805] After Samson's hair is shaved

from his head, Yhwh turns away from him (Judg 16:19–20), and the Philistine lords

move in.[806]

Judges 16:21 is marked by a succession of five verbal clauses. The first clause

includes the verb "to seize" (אחז), which frequently precedes brutal acts of violence in the

book of Judges (Judg 1:6; 12:6; 16:3; 20:6.). After the Philistines seize Samson, they

move in closer to gouge out (נקר) his eyes. As noted above, the blinding of Samson is a

markedly gruesome act shared only by one other biblical character, Zedekiah (2 Kgs

25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11). The mutilation of enemies was, of course, common in the Bible

(cf. Judg 1:1–7; 8:6–21; 1 Sam 10:27–11:11; 17:54; 31:8–10) and the ancient Near

East.[807] Rather than execute prisoners of war, conquerors often placed captives into

forced labor and removed their eyes to ensure they would not escape or rebel.[808] Blinding

may also have been a punishment for a person who violated a covenant. In the Vassal

Treaties of Esarhaddon, for example, it states the following: "May Shamash, the light of

heaven and earth, not judge you justly. May he remove your eyesight. Walk about in

darkness!" (§40) and "Just as those who cursed sinned against Bel and he cut off their

hands and feet and blinded their eyes, so may they annihilate you, and make you sway

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[805] Niditch, '*My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man*,' 63–81.

[806] Jack M. Sasson, "Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 333–39; and Cornelis Houtman, "Who Cut Samson's Hair? The Interpretation of Judges 16:19a Reconsidered," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, eds. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 67–86.

[807] Tracy M. Lemos, "Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible," *JBL* 125 (2006): 225–41.

[808] Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero*, 201.

like reeds in water" (§95). Removing the eyes of captured enemies was not only an effective way to transform prisoners of war into obedient slaves, but to also use their mutilation as a public warning against other detractors.[809] This appears to be one of the reasons for the blinding of Samson and Zedekiah since both become submissive prisoners in the lands of their captors.

After Samson is subdued and blinded, he is brought back down (ירד) to Gaza. Gaza was a very appropriate place to send Samson, not only to repay Samson for his previous damage to the city and humiliation of the Gazites (Judg 16:1–3), but because a temple to Dagon is now revealed to be there and the Philistines could therefore relish in the physical defeat of Samson and the divine victory of Dagon over the God of Israel (Judg 16:23–27).[810] Once the captured and blinded Samson is brought down to Gaza, he is bound (אסר) in bronze shackles (cf. 2 Sam 3:33–34). Prisoners of war were often shackled to subdue and control them. Van der Toorn compares the treatment of Samson's captivity with an inscription from Esarhaddon, in which the rebellious ruler Rusa is unable to escape, so in a desperate act of surrender he sends the Assyrian king a statuette (*ṣalmu*), whose eyes are wrapped in sackcloth (*bašāmu*), whose limbs are bound with shackles (*birētu*), and whose hands are holding a grinding slab (*erū*).[811] The similarities between this symbolic act and the treatment of Samson and Zedekiah are striking. Yet van der Toorn demonstrates that such a fate was common for captives in Mesopotamia.[812]

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[809] Lemos, "Shame and Mutilation," 240–41.

[810] Singer, "Towards the Image"; Mazar, "Temples and Cult"; Crowell, "Development of Dagan"; and Emanuel, "'Dagon Our God.'"

[811] Van der Toorn, "Judges XVI," 249.

[812] Van der Toorn, "Judges XVI," 249–51. Cf. Seri, *House of Prisoners*.

The word for Samson's shackles (נחשתים) is in the dual form, possibly indicating that both his hands and feet were chained. Such elaborate restraints would be a feasible precaution considering Samson's notorious strength and ability to escape bondage (Judg 15:14; 16:6–14). Niditch suggests that the language used for Samson's bronze shackles may reflect his feminization by the Philistines, given its sexual connotations in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek 16:36) and possible association with female hemorrhaging (Ezek 24:11; cf. Akk. *naḫšātu*).[813] If so, such feminization is only intensified as Samson's fate unfolds, though this interpretation of the semantic sense in the book of Ezekiel has been called into doubt.[814] Thus, the fifth and final verbal clause in Judg 16:21, where Samson grinds (טחן) grain at the mill, has drawn a lot of attention from biblical scholars reading the text through the lens of gender criticism.[815] It has often been noted that women, servants, and slaves primarily ground grain, and that many biblical passages use the image of the millstone to highlight this reality (e.g., Exod 11:5; Judg 9:53; Isa 47:2–3; Lam 5:13; Ecc 12:3).[816] The act of grinding also has implicit sexual connotations in the Bible.[817] For example, when Job testifies to his innocence before God, he declares: "If my heart has been enticed by a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbor's door; then let my wife grind (טחן) for another, and let other men kneel over her" (Job 31:9–10). Many scholars

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[813] Niditch, *Judges*, 166; and Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 237.

[814] Cf. Abraham Winitzer, "World Literature as a Source for Israelite History: Gilgamesh in Ezekiel 16," in *Writing and Rewriting History in Ancient Israel and Near Eastern Culture*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020), 115–17.

[815] Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, "Samson: Masculinity Lost"; and Kalmanofsky, "Manoah, Manoah's Wife."

[816] Van der Toorn, "Judges XVI," 249; Exum, "Samson's Women," 84; Gunn, *Judges*, 220; Niditch, *Judges*, 171; Groß, *Richter*, 726; and Spronk, *Judges*, 446.

[817] Exum, "Samson's Women," 79; Gunn, *Judges*, 222; and Niditch, *Judges*, 171.

make the case that Samson is not only feminized but treated like a sexually subdued woman.[818] Indeed, the humiliating punishments of Samson, including being forced to entertain (שׂחק) the jeering Philistines (Judg 16:25, 27)—a pun on the hero who is about to crush (שׂחק) his enemies—diminish his hyper-macho prowess and relegate him to the status of a subdued slave or woman.[819]

As noted above, Samson's individual body can also be metaphorically understood as representing the larger theo-political body of Israel, since he is the people's divinely appointed deliverer.[820] As such, the defeat and humiliation of Israel's mightiest hero also represents the defeat and humiliation of Israel itself.[821] Nevertheless, the triumphal turn of events at the end of the story, when Samson pulverizes the enemies of Israel under the rubble of their own temple (Judg 16:30), is one of several examples whereby the Deuteronomists convert the shame of defeat into an occasion of honor for Yhwh.[822] At the same time, the destruction of the columns (העמדים) by Samson in the temple (בית) of Dagon (Judg 16:26) may also foreshadow the destruction of the columns (העמדים) by the Babylonians in the temple (בית) of Yhwh (2 Kgs 25:13, 16–17), creating an inverted image of death and destruction at the hands of an enemy.[823]

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[818] Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," 617; Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, "Samson: Masculinity Lost," 179; and Kalmanofsky, "Manoah, Manoah's Wife," 88–89.

[819] Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh."

[820] Morgenstern, "Samson and the Politics."

[821] Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 252–53; and Mbuvi, "Samson's Body Politic," 405–06.

[822] Kathryn F. Kravitz, "Biblical Remedial Narratives: The Triumph of the Trophies," in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller*, ed. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 115–28 [esp. 119–24]. Cf. Hebrew נֶפֶשׁ with Akkadian *napištu* (Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical*, 244–46).

[823] Spronk, *Judges*, 448.

Unfortunately, no such retribution is exercised by the last king of Judah, who suffers a similar demise to the mighty Samson and whose life and reign is narrated in a highly stylized account.[824] Like his familial and royal predecessors, Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 24:6–16) and Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 23:34–24:5), Zedekiah seals his fate by rebelling against his Babylonian overlord (2 Kgs 24:20). By defecting to the Egyptians, Zedekiah hoped that Pharaoh and his army would successfully defend Jerusalem and drive back the Babylonians (Jer 37:5). Instead, the word of the prophet Jeremiah comes true (Jer 37:6–10) and the Babylonians raze Jerusalem and its temple to the ground after once again defeating the Egyptians on the battlefield (Jer 39:1–10; 52:3–30; 2 Kgs 25:8–21).[825]

As noted above, like Samson, Zedekiah is caught by his overlords, his eyes are put out (עור), he is bound (אסר) in bronze shackles (נחשתים), and he is brought (בוא) to the land of his captors (2 Kgs 25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11). According to the ending of Jeremiah, Zedekiah is also put into prison until the day of his death (Jer 52:11; cf. Judg 13:7). This final detail has either been inserted into Jer 52:11 or omitted from 2 Kgs 25:7 and Jer 39:7, where Zedekiah is only blinded, bound, and brought to Babylon.[826] Most scholars argue that Jer 52 is the later text and uses the account in the book of Kings as its source. However, according to Henk de Waard, Jer 52 is not simply a textual appendage taken

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[824] Herman-Josef Stipp, "Zedekiah in the Book of Jeremiah: On the Formation of a Biblical Character," *CBQ* 58 (1996): 627–48; and Mark Roncace, *Jeremiah, Zedekiah, and the Fall of Jerusalem*, LHBOTS 423 (London: T&T Clark, 2005.

[825] Lipschitz, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*.

[826] William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2 – A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26–52*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 280–87, 292, 439–41; Stipp, "Zedekiah in the Book of Jeremiah"; John Applegate, "The Fate of Zedekiah: Redactional Debate in the book of Jeremiah. Part I," *VT* 48 (1998): 137–60; idem, "The Fate of Zedekiah: Redactional Debate in the book of Jeremiah. Part II," *VT* 48 (1998): 301–08; and Juha Pakkala, "Zedekiah's Fate and the Dynastic Succession," *JBL* 125 (2006): 443–52.

from 2 Kgs 25, but rather a *golah*-oriented epilogue that reveals the contrasting destinies of pre-exilic Judah and the exilic community in Babylon.[827] Waard demonstrates how these dual perspectives are reflected in the complex development of the book of Jeremiah in the Old Greek (Jer*G*) and Hebrew (Jer*MT*) manuscript traditions alongside their respective *Vorlagen*.[828] Intriguingly, Samson is also placed into a type of imprisonment (בבית האסירים) very similar to Zedekiah (בית־הפקדת), both of which are described with *hapax legomena*, strongly suggesting a direct literary connection drawn by scribes.[829] Thus, according to Waard:

> Jer*MT* and Jer*G* differ with regard to the exact location of Zedekiah's confinement, and both readings are *hapax legomena*. בֵּית־הַפְּקֻדֹּת may be translated as 'the house of punishments' (cf. Ezek 9:1), but οἰκίαν μύλωνος means 'mill house' and apparently refers to a place where Zedekiah was put to forced labor. Although an interpretive translation cannot be ruled out completely (especially because the Hebrew is unique), the consistent translation of the root פקד (in the sense of 'to visit, to attend to') in Jer*G* 29–52 rather suggests that the Greek derives from a *Vorlage* different from Jer*MT*. As argued by van der Toorn, οἰκίαν μύλωνος probably reflects a Hebrew rendering of the Akkadian *bīt ararri* "house of the miller, mill," which is tentatively reconstructed by Holladay as בֵּית־הַטַּחֲנָה. Grinding may well have been Zedekiah's actual fate, which supports the assumption that 'mill house' was the earliest reading (an assumption based on the general priority of Jer*AlT*). According to Holladay, this reading 'was later generalized to that of *M* [*MT*] when the custom was no longer self-evident,' but an alternative motivation for creating the unusual בֵּית־הַפְּקֻדֹּת can be found in Jeremiah's prophecy that, in Babylon, Zedekiah would be 'visited' (פקד) by Yᴴᴡᴴ.[830]

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[827] Henk de Waard, *Jeremiah 52 in the Context of the Book of Jeremiah*, VTSup 183 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 231–35.

[828] Waard, *Jeremiah 52*, 9–95.

[829] Cf. Van der Toorn, "Judges XVI"; and Seri, *House of Prisoners*. See Cynthia Edenburg, "Intertextuality, Literary Competence and the Question of Readership: Some Preliminary Observations," *JSOT* 35 (2010): 147–48.

[830] Waard, *Jeremiah 52*, 60–61.

Furthermore, because this addition to the book of Jeremiah likely emerges from a scribal context beginning in the exilic period, in which a variety of textual traditions coalesced into larger biblical compositions, the shared demise of the final judge and final king may have emerged together as bookends signaling the failed leadership of Israel and Judah in the DH. In other words, the downfall and exile of Zedekiah is foreshadowed by the downfall and exile of Samson.[831]

4.5. Conclusion

What then does one make of these connections between Samson and Zedekiah? First, the question of what constitutes legitimate leadership for the people of Israel and Judah is at the forefront of the DH.[832] The role of the king (Deut 17:14–20) and the monarchy in general (1 Sam 8) are highly contested issues throughout the DH, including the supposed period of the judges when "there was no king in Israel" (אין מלך בישראל) (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Still, the diminished responsibility of the king in the book of Deuteronomy and the anti-monarchic perspective in the book of Judges are not the final words on the complex portrayal of the monarchy in the DH.[833] Furthermore, as argued above, after the destruction and exile of Judah, the DH transforms (Deut 4:25–31;

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[831] Raymond F. Person, Jr., "I Kings 24,18–25,30 and Jeremiah 52: A Text-Critical Case Study in the Redaction History of the Deuteronomistic History," *ZAW* 105 (1993): 174–205; Thomas C. Römer, "Is There a Deuteronomistic Redaction in the Book of Jeremiah?" in *Israel Constructs Its History: Deuteronomistic Historiography in Recent Research*, ed. Albert de Pury et al., JSOTSup 306 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 415–416; Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology*, 139–40; and Waard, *Jeremiah 52*, 158–98.

[832] Gary N. Knoppers, *Two Nations Under God – The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies*, 2 vols., HSM 52–53 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993–94).

[833] Gary N. Knoppers, "The Deuteronomist and the Deuteronomic Law of the King: A Reexamination of a Relationship," *ZAW* 108 (1996): 329–46; idem, "Rethinking the Relationship between Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History: The Case of Kings," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 393–415; and Becker, "Place of the Book of Judges," 350–51.

30:1–10; 1 Kgs 8:46–51) into a political project seeking to define the identity of a defeated people and to discover the reason for their divine punishment.[834] This *Tendenz* can been seen in the diverse reflections from Israel and Judah that explore their complicated relationship to each other, the nations, and Yhwh.[835] Within these reflections is a central question: Who is our true leader? On the one hand, the answer is simple, it is Yhwh, the God of Israel (Deut 7:6–11; Josh 23:6–13; Judg 8:23; cf. 1 Sam 8). On the other hand, the answer is complicated by the many intermediaries who occupy various leadership roles throughout the storied histories of Israel and Judah, including the judges.[836] The period of the judges allows the people of Israel and Judah to reflect upon the range of different political leaders during the time between the conquest of the promised land and the monarchy ruling over that land.[837] In turn, the judges anticipate, endorse, and critique later monarchic rulers, especially the northern kings of Israel, with whom they share many of the same responsibilities.[838] Within this political spectrum, all manner of leadership, whether judge, king, prophet, or priest, contain multiple examples of failure and success. In this way, the book of Judges is an example of comprehensive

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[834] Jacob L. Wright, "The Commemoration of Defeat and the Formation of a Nation in the Hebrew Bible," *Prooftexts* 29 (2009): 433–73; and Knoppers, "History as Confession."

[835] Gary Knoppers, "Is There a Future for the Deuteronomistic History?" in *The Future of the Deuteronomistic History*, ed. Thomas Römer, BETL CXLVII (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 119–34.

[836] Focken, "Structure of Offices."

[837] Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Memories Laid to Rest: The Book of Judges in the Persian Period," in *Deuteronomy–Kings as Emerging Authoritative Books – A Conversation*, ed. Diana V. Edelman, ANEM 6 Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 115–32; and Becker, "Place of the Book of Judges."

[838] Römer, *So-Called*, 137–38; Brettler, "Book of Judges," 416–18; and Müller, "Redactional Framework," 129–30, 34.

history-writing in Israel and Judah, whether as an independent work in the preexilic period or as part of the rolling corpus of the DH.[839]

Amid this political drama is Samson, who serves as a foil to Israelite leadership in general and to kingship in particular. Samson squanders his incredible abilities, many of which reflect royal traits exhibited by Israel's most prominent kings. Thus, Samson's divine election, his ability to battle beasts and Philistines with unconventional weapons, and his martial commemoration at Hebron resembles David (1 Sam 16–17; 2 Sam 2:1–7, 5:17–25, 8:1), his penchant for language games (חידות) and foreign women reflects Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1–7; 11:1–13), and his unique possession by the spirit of Yhwh, abandonment by Yhwh, and subsequent suicide mirrors the tragic ending of Saul (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:14; 30:1–7).[840] Samson also foreshadows Zedekiah, the final king of Judah.[841] In so doing, both signify the fragility of all blind leaders in the DH who perpetually "do what is evil in the eyes of Yhwh" (יעש הרע בעיני יהוה).[842] Yet the demise of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah paradoxically upholds the Deuteronomistic standard of divine judgment, inviting the people of Israel and Judah to radical repentance.[843] Hence, the downfalls of Samson and Zedekiah are not the final words in their respective

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[839] Römer, *So-Called*, 114; and Amit, "Book of Judges," 114.

[840] Brooks, "Saul and the Samson Narrative"; Lara van der Zee, "Samson and Samuel: Two Examples of Leadership," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 53–65; Peterson, "Samson: Hero or Villain?"; Herbst, "Valuing Leadership;" and Exum, "Samson and Saul."

[841] Kratz, *Composition*, 195–96; Müller, "Redactional Framework," 132–33.

[842] The condemnation of the leaders of Israel and Judah who "do evil in the eyes of Yhwh" is a common trope in the Deuteronomistic History. See, for example, 1 Sam 15:19; 2 Sam 11:27; 1 Kgs 11:6, 15:25–26, 33–34; 16:18–19, 25, 30; 21:25; 22:52–53; 2 Kgs 3:1–2; 8:16–18, 26–27; 13:1–2, 10–11; 14:23–24; 15:8–9, 17–18, 23–24, 27–28; 16:2; 17:1–2; 21:1–2; 19–20; 23:31–32, 36–37; 24:8–9, 18–19.

[843] Knoppers, "History as Confession," 307.

stories. Eventually the columns come crashing down on Israel's enemies (Judg 16:23–30) and the line of David survives after the release of Jehoiachin from prison and his invitation to the king's table (2 Kgs 25:27–30). Both endings provide consolation and hope to an exilic audience forced to witness the destruction of their city, land, and temple, and the dissolution of the royal throne.[844] However, such hope is extremely fragile for those living in exile, as well as for those eventually returning to the land, since the future of Judah is as dark and difficult to see as the world around the blinded Samson.[845]

How the people of Israel and Judah arrived at such a place, and how they returned to the one promised to them and their ancestors is not only represented in the biblical stories collected and composed in the DH in general, but also reflected and refracted in the prism of the Samson stories in particular. The compositional history of the Samson stories, and the process of their evolution explored above is reviewed in the following and final chapter, along with the possible trajectory of further exploration.

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[844] Kravitz, "Biblical Remedial Narratives," 124.

[845] Yairah Amit, "Who Was Interested in the Book of Judges in the Persian-Hellenistic Periods?" in *Deuteronomy–Kings as Emerging Authoritative Books – A Conversation*, ed. Diana V. Edelman, ANEM 6 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 103–14.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SAMSON STORIES

5.1. Introduction

The enormous and striking painting "Samson" by the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century Anglo-Jewish artist, Solomon Joseph Solomon, artistically captures the

interpretive imagination of the biblical scribes who composed the Samson and Delilah

story almost three millennia ago (see Fig. 5.1).[846] Bare-breasted and confidently holding

the locks of hair that robbed Samson of his strength, Delilah relishes in her victory while

staring into the eyes of a befuddled Samson, who inexplicably appears in control, despite

the five Philistines—perhaps lords—attempting to bind him, and a horde of Philistine

soldiers piling into the room. Like the story in the Bible, Solomon's painting was created

over a prolonged period of time, in which the artist not only sketched and painted many

copies before arriving at its final form but drew upon the paintings from other artists and

artistic traditions, including masters of the early modernist period, such as Peter Paul

Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, and Rembrandt, who themselves had drawn upon the work

of prior artists. Solomon's painting also reflects the cultural and social situation of an

Anglo-Jewish artist living in England around the turn of the nineteenth century, as the

rise of Zionism and revival of Jewish cultural identity was underway, something depicted

in Samson's strong resistance to his gentile opponents in the painting. Hence, Irit Miller

makes the following keen observations:

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[846] For more on the artist, and the creation and reception history of the painting, See Irit Miller, "Samson by Solomon J. Solomon: Victorian Academy and Jewish Identity," *Jewish Historical Studies* 42 (2009): 121–38.

The fact that a Jewish artist painted this scene from the life of Samson removes the hero from his conventional place in the Christian-Western painting tradition and appropriates him for Jewish art. Like some of his predecessors, Solomon chose the moment of Samson's struggle with his foes. But unlike them he stressed the physical strength and heroic appearance of Samson. Rembrandt, as mentioned above, had represented Samson overpowered and blinded, while Rubens and Van Dyck implied that he was about to be defeated. The Neoclassical painting by the French academy Grand Prix de Rome winner, Joseph-Desire Court, shows Samson shocked and almost frozen. In all these depictions one can trace signs of weakness, fear, confusion, or astonishment. Solomon, unlike them, depicts Samson rising above and struggling courageously to overcome enemies whose straining muscles reflect the effort required to bind him.[847]
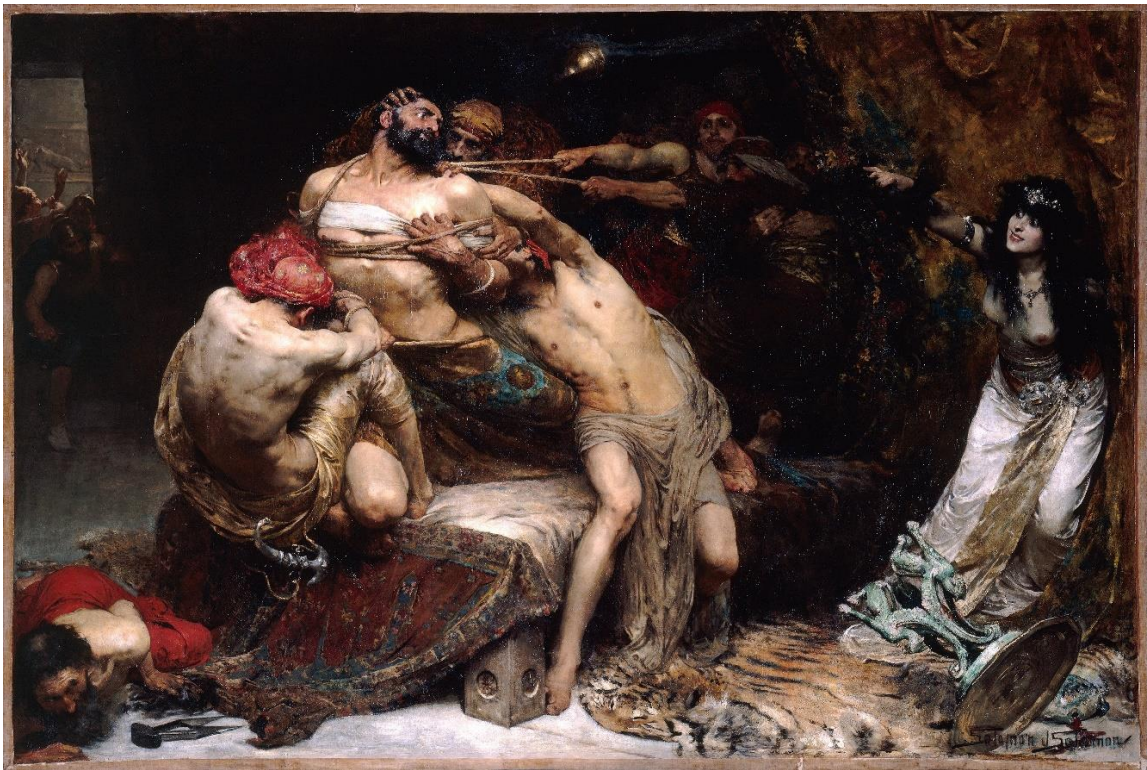

Figure 5.1. "Samson" (1887) by Joseph Solomon Joseph.

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[847] Miller, "Samson," 134–35.

The painting not only evolved in the colors blended and brushed onto each new canvas, but also in the imagination of the artist himself. Likewise, when biblical scribes were collecting and composing the oral and literary traditions of Israel and Judah, their texts gradually evolved on the new and used leather scrolls and papyrus used to preserve the thoughts and words of those who came before them while also adding their own.

In this dissertation, it was argued that the Samson stories also evolved over a prolonged period of time, likely beginning in Jerusalem in the late seventh century BCE during the Neo-Assyrian period and continuing over the next several centuries through the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. It was shown how the character of Samson evolved from a border-crossing warrior clashing with Israel's enemies (Judg 14–15) to a tragic hero foreshadowing the downfall of Judah (Judg 16) to a demythologized Nazirite under the care and control of Yhwh (Judg 13). It was argued that each of these major supplements—principally the addition of an ending (Judg 16) and a beginning (Judg 13) to the literary core of the text (Judg 14–15)—reshaped the form and function of the whole composition. The diachronic investigation was therefore in service to a synchronic reading of the text in its final forms. In opposition to the claims of Noth and others who claim the Samson stories lack Deuteronomistic features, it was argued that the Samson stories are filled with Deuteronomistic language and themes. The different layers of the Samson stories were therefore read together and alongside other Deuteronomistic texts, showcasing how the DH is a polyphonic corpus of literature.

By focusing on the evolution of the Samson stories and its relationship to the larger textual developments of the book of Judges and the DH, it was argued that Samson became a significant part of both, functioning as a symbol of Israel itself, especially in his

pursuit of foreign women (cf. Israel's idolatry) and in doing what is evil rather than what

is good in the eyes of Yhwh (cf. Judah's kings), according to Deuteronomistic theology.

Lastly, it was demonstrated that Samson embodies the story of Israel's deliverance and

demise in his promising rise (Judg 14–15) and tragic fall (Judg 16). The central chapters

above made a detailed case for each of these arguments, which are reviewed below.

5.2. Review of the Chapters

In Chapter Two, the Samson stories were situated within the larger historical

context of Canaan during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age.

It was shown how ancient Israel and Philistia were part of an entangled culture of

Canaanites, Philistines, and Israelites who shared many of the same characteristics and

traits. By examining the archaeological data of two excavated sites in the Shephelah that

were occupied by Philistines, Israelites, and Judahites, it was shown how the region of

the Sorek Valley fell prey to a "seesaw effect" where territorial control was determined

by whichever group was dominant in the area. The proximity and political instability of

the different people living in that region meant there was significant cultural and social

exchange, often blurring the lines between Philistine, Israelite, and Judahite identity.

It was noted how the reality of *ancient* Israel in the archaeological record is

reflected in the world of *biblical* Israel in the Samson stories. Despite these similarities,

major differences were also examined. In particular, the identification of Dagon as a deity

worshipped by the Philistines and Samson as a Danite judge over all Israel. It was shown

how there is no archaeological evidence for Dagon in Philistia, but rather the Philistines

appear to have primarily worshipped a female deity, whom scholars identify as Ashdoda,

likely of an ancient Aegean origin. Lastly, Samson's role as a שפט and the system of

governance in which the שפטים operated were compared with the social and political life of the kingdom of Mari during the reign of King Zimri-Lim toward the end of the Middle Bronze Age (eighteenth century BCE). Differences in genre between the biblical texts and those examined at Mari were demonstrated, but it was also shown how many of the traditions in the Bible reflect some authentic knowledge of Northwest Semitic life in the second millennium BCE, especially when the responsibilities of the *merḫûms* and *šāpiṭum* at Mari were compared with those of the שפטים in the Bible.

Thus, in response to scholars who argue that the Samson stories are only a late construct composed during the postexilic and Hellenistic period, it was shown how the Samson stories more likely evolved over time and are embedded with ancient memories and traditions that hark back to "the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1) and "there was no king in Israel" (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

In Chapter Three, it was shown how the ongoing conflict with the Neo-Assyrian empire eventually left the kingdom of Judah in disarray, despite its capital city having survived Sennacherib's siege in 701 BCE, largely reducing the kingdom of Judah to a city-state confined to Jerusalem and its hinterland. Within this new environment, the population of Jerusalem swelled, as more residents of the ravaged areas in the southern Levant poured into the city. This migration included Israelites, as well as displaced Philistines, whose border towns with Judah also suffered at the hands of the Assyrians. As a result, a variety of cultural, political, and religious issues came to the fore, some of which are reflected in the biblical writings that began to emerge during the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. The appearance of these biblical texts was mirrored by a prolific period of text production in general, which is reflected in the significant

increase of written objects discovered in Judah during this time, including bullae, ostraca, inscribed weights, and the *lmlk* seals. It was these expansionist policies into the Levant by the Neo-Assyrian empire that likely affected major changes in the underlying ideologies of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It was argued above that within this sociopolitical background, the core Samson stories (Judg 14–15) adopted several distinct issues, especially as they developed alongside other texts in the DH.

It was argued that the older, literary core of the Samson stories is Judg 14–15, which can be differentiated from the major additions of Judg 16 and Judg 13 by several distinguishable features. The first of these is the verb צלח to describe the rushing of the spirit of Yhwh upon Samson (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), something only found in other Deuteronomistic texts featuring Saul and David (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13; 18:10). The second feature listed was the absence of the Nazirite vow in the core Samson stories, despite it being central to Samson's birth narrative (Judg 13) and a brief albeit important detail that Samson shares with Delilah (Judg 16:17). It was shown how the Nazirite vow is not part of the core stories, and if it was then Samson repeatedly breaks the stipulations outlined to his parents by the messenger of Yhwh (Judg 13:4–5, 13–14), as well as those detailed to Moses by Yhwh in the book of Numbers (Num 6:1–21), even though the latter is very likely a late Priestly text and a different Nazirite vow than the one here. The third distinguishable feature explored was how Samson is not situated by the authors between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg 13:25; 16:31), nor is he identified with his father as an Israelite from the clan of Dan (Judg 13:2), as in Judg 13 and 16. In short, Samson is not explicitly identified as an Israelite in Judg 14–15. Instead, it is only the "men of Judah" who appear inside the core Samson stories when they bargain with Samson and the Philistines to turn

him over to the Philistines at Lehi (Judg 15:9–11). Meanwhile, Israel is only mentioned twice in these core stories, and simply as an aside from the narrator (Judg 14:4; 15:20). Thus, it was argued that since there is no explicit affiliation of Samson with the clan of Dan or Israel in Judg 14–15, but only with Judah and territories on its borders, then Samson was most likely a Judahite character before he was depicted as a שפט over Israel (Judg 15:20; 16:31) and associated with the clan of Dan (Judg 13:2; 16:31).

Next, the core Samson stories were read within the context of the Neo-Assyrian empire and its rule over Israel and Judah during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The chapter explored how Neo-Assyrian hegemony might have affected the composition of the Samson stories during this period in which the mighty Samson is portrayed as a solitary warrior fighting on behalf of Israel against a far more powerful overlord. This chapter also asked how the collapse of the northern kingdom of Israel, influx of Israelites and others into Judah, and the weakened borders with Philistia, might have informed the texts' concern with intermarriage. The nature of this problem was demonstrated in the sexual innuendos exhibited in Samson's revelry with the Philistines during and after his marriage to the Timnite woman. Each of these risqué elements of wordplay displayed in the text was a way to reinforce the underlying danger intermarriage was thought to pose for Israel in the DH, one believed to lead to the idolatrous worship of foreign gods and the denigration of the covenant with Yhwh (e.g., Deut 7:1–6; Judg 2:11–3:6).

Regarding wordplay, the role of master scribes in the ancient Near East was explored to understand how vital the command of language also was in the cultural, political, and religious world of Israel and Judah. In particular, the sophisticated use of wordplay was examined throughout the Samson stories, in which the authors employed a

wide range of literary and rhetorical devices, such as assonance, irony, puns, repetition, riddles, and rhyme. It was argued that being allies, enemies, and/or vassals of the empires to the north (Assyria, Babylon, Persia) and south (Egypt) of Israel and Judah meant that the activity of these master scribes was important for understanding the ways in which biblical scribes were also preserving their own textual traditions, displaying mastery of their own native tongue, and exhibiting religious and social power through sophisticated wordplay in these imperial contexts. It was argued that this command of language was a type of narrative resistance by biblical scribes whose texts reflected the dynamic cultural, religious, and social realities in Israel and Judah, often in opposition to their far larger and more powerful overlords.

To better understand the use of wordplay by the authors of the Samson stories, two primary categories from ancient Greek rhetoric were utilized: paronomasia and polysemy. The prevalence of these types of sophisticated wordplay was shown in every section of the core Samson stories, along with folkloric features drawn from their oldest oral and literary traditions. In so doing, it was shown how the authors of the Samson stories appeared to have kept one eye on the folkloric tales of a heroic wild man from the northern Shephelah and another on the looming shadow of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Thus, it was argued that the battle of brains and brawn between the lowly Samson and the powerful Philistines provided a fitting allegory for the struggle between the small vassal kingdom of Judah and its ruling overlord Assyria. Such clever and complex resistance was demonstrated in Samson's deadly bout of *lex talionis* with the Philistines.

In Chapter Four, the connections between Samson and Zedekiah were explored through Samson's ventures into Gaza, first as he indulges a sex-worker in the city and

foils the plans of the Gazites to ambush him (Judg 16:1–3), and second as he is blinded,

chained, and exiled to Gaza as a prisoner to grind grain and entertain Philistines in the

temple of Dagon (Judg 16:21–30). It was noted that the literary connections between the

capture of Samson (Judg 16:21) and Zedekiah (2 Kgs 25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11) has at times

been drawn by scholars, but that its depth has not been adequately explored. Furthermore,

it does not appear that any scholar has included the story of Samson's initial journey into

Gaza (Judg 16:1–3) with their comparison to Zedekiah, particularly the narrative details

leading up to his capture and punishment by the king of Babylon (2 Kgs 25:1–7). Hence,

numerous literary aspects were shown to overlap in each story, and it was argued that

they are part and parcel of the overall language and themes found within the DH.

Next, the question was asked about what constitutes legitimate leadership for the

people of Israel and Judah in the DH. Despite the diminished responsibilities of the king

of Israel in Deuteronomy (Deut 17:14–20) and the anti-monarchic perspective in the book

of Judges, these are not the final perspective in the portrayal of the monarchy in the DH.

Furthermore, it was argued that after the destruction of Judah and the exile of the Judean

elite, the DH transformed (Deut 4:25–31; 30:1–10; 1 Kgs 8:46–51) into a political and

theological project seeking to define the identity of a defeated people and discover the

reasons for their divine punishment. This *Tendenz* can been seen in the diverse reflections

of Israel and Judah exploring their complicated relationship to each other, to the nations,

and to Yhwh. It was argued that within these reflections is a central question: who is the

true leader of Israel? On the one hand, the answer is simple, it is Yhwh, the God of Israel

(Deut 7:6–11; Josh 23:6–13; Judg 8:23; cf. 1 Sam 8). On the other hand, the answer is

complicated by the intermediaries who occupy various leadership roles throughout the

storied histories of Israel and Judah, including the judges. Therefore, it was argued that the stories of the judges allow the people of Israel and Judah to reflect upon the range of different political leaders during the time between the conquest and the monarchy.

Lastly, amid this political drama, it was argued that Samson serves as a foil to Israelite leadership in general and to kingship in particular. It was noted how Samson squanders his incredible abilities, many of which reflect royal traits exhibited by Israel's most prominent kings. For example, Samson's divine election, his ability to battle beasts and Philistines with unconventional weapons, and his martial commemoration at Hebron resembles David (1 Sam 16–17; 2 Sam 2:1–7, 5:17–25, 8:1); his penchant for riddles and foreign women reflects Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1–7; 11:1–13); and his unique possession and later abandonment by the spirit of Yhwh, and subsequent suicide mirrors the tragic life of Saul (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:14; 30:1–7). It was also shown how Samson foreshadows Zedekiah and argued that both were intended to signify the fragility of all blind leaders in the DH, who perpetually "do what is evil in the eyes of Yhwh." Yet, it was suggested that the downfalls of Samson and Zedekiah are not the end of hope in their respective stories. Eventually the columns do come crashing down on the Philistines (Judg 16:23–30) and the line of David does survive after the release of King Jehoiachin from the prisons of Babylon (2 Kgs 25:27–30). It was argued both endings provide consolation and hope to an exilic audience forced to witness the destruction of their temple and the dissolution of the royal throne. Such hope, of course, is fragile for those living in exile, as well as for those eventually returning to the land, but it nevertheless remains.

While the arguments made above are intended to be persuasive, the Samson stories are not constrained to a single dominant reading or theme. In fact, the array of

possible interpretations indicates a significant semantic flexibility within the text itself. Some additional areas of research and questions for further study, then, are listed below.

5.3. Further Areas of Research

One area for further exploration is the second major paratextual addition to the Samson stories, Judg 13, and reading it against the religious and social reforms associated with the Priestly school during the Persian period. The primary focus of that investigation would be the Priestly redaction of the Pentateuch and DH, which many argue provided the connective tissue for the Enneateauch (Gen–Kgs) and included the addition of Samson's birth narrative (Judg 13), transforming him from a folkloric and/or mythical strongman into a life-long Nazirite under the care and control of Yhwh. This Priestly redaction likely changed the story by locating Samson's incredible strength with his obedience to the Nazirite vow (Judg 16:17α) rather than with his magical locks of hair (Judg 16:17β, 22) or the spirit of Yhwh (14:6, 19; 15:14).

Another area of research would be to explore the earliest known Jewish reception of the Samson stories in the writings of Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*) and Pseudo-Philo (*Biblical Antiquities* and *On Samson*) and situate them within the context of Hellenistic Judaism and Greco-Roman culture during the first century CE. These interpretations of the Samson stories might bolster the claims made in the diachronic investigation made above by drawing attention to similar tensions perceived by their earliest known readers. It would be worth exploring how these forms of rewritten scripture (*Jewish Antiquities* and *Biblical Antiquities*) and homiletical discourse (*On Samson*) reflect the socioreligious settings of their authors and readers, which might highlight some of the diachronic issues encountered by modern biblical scholars. In other words, the early "effective history"

(*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the Samson stories may illuminate the ways in which the texts affected culture and vice versa through their interpretive horizons. These types of questions, and others likes them, would hopefully bolster the central arguments made above and clear the way for new investigations into the compositional and reception histories of the Samson stories.

5.4. Conclusion

For many, the Samson stories are entertaining tales teaching their hearers and readers what not to do through the negative example of their main character. For others, they represent folklore about a heroic wild man who gets the best of his enemies, or a myth imbued with existential significance, or alternatively a political allegory about the successful resistance of an oppressed people. Still, for others, these stories are about the journey of a blinded hero, who in his final moments sought to fulfill the weighty promises placed upon his shoulders from his god. The Israeli writer, David Grossman, encapsulates these polyphonic readings well when he writes the following:

> There are few other Bible stories with so much drama and action, narrative fireworks and raw emotion, as we find in the tale of Samson: the battle with the lion; the three hundred burning foxes; the women he bedded and the one woman that he loved; his betrayal by all the women in his life, from his mother to Delilah, and, in the end, his murderous suicide, when he brought the house down on himself and three thousand Philistines. Yet beyond the wild impulsiveness, the chaos, the din, we can make out a life story that is, at bottom, the tortured journey of a single, lonely and turbulent soul who never found, anywhere, a true home in the world, whose very body was a harsh place of exile. For me, this discovery, this recognition, is the point at which the myth – for all its grand images, its larger than life adventures – slips silently into the day to day existence of each of us, into our most private moments, our buried secrets.[848]

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[848] Grossman, *Lion's Honey*, 2–3.

These many faces of Samson cannot and should not be reduced to one. Instead,

they reflect what Mikhail Bakhtin identified as a character's "unfinalizability," that is, the

inability to be finalized, completely understood, known, or labeled.[849] Samson represents

such characters because of his evolution over time by the hands of his authors and by the

ears of his hearers and the eyes of his readers, allowing him to embody the roles of hero,

judge, Nazirite, and wild man—among others. The potential of his character, enabled by

the literary and rhetorical brilliance of the biblical scribes who brought him to life, is such

that any of those roles can and should be actualized. Samson is therefore not easily bound

or controlled. Instead, he forces hearers and readers to discover the source of their own

strengths while never fully revealing his own.

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[849] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 47–77; Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 36–40; and Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 294–95.

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