

THE STORY OF SAMSON (Judges 13 – 16)

Judges Chapter 13 – Haftarah Naso (vv. 2-25 incl.)

1 The Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of YHVH; and YHVH delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for 40 years.

Me: Identical opening to Deborah [Judg. 4:1], almost identical in Gideon [Judg. 6:1], and identical in Jephthah [Judg. 10:6]. Last time this introduction is used as Samson is last Judge in the Book.

Hamblin: Of all the enemies of Israel in the Book of Judges, the Philistines were the most persistent and, in the long run, the most threatening. They posed a mortal danger to Israel up until their final defeat by King David [2 Sam. 8:1]. Three factors made the Philistines such a mortal threat to Israelite independence: i) their efficient political organisation which made it possible for their pentapolis (five city-states) to act as one; ii) their military discipline; and iii) their superiority in military technology, including chariots and a monopoly on iron weapons which gave them an advantage over the bronze weapons of the Israelites.

2 There was a man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; his wife was barren and had not given birth.

BDB: Zorah is in the Shephelah (lowlands) of Judah but was assigned to Dan. Identified with modern Sar'a, 15 miles west of Jerusalem.

Wikipedia: Zorah could mean possibly a place of hornets (BDB: Zirah). Zorah is Biblical Zoreah which overlooked the valley of Sorek. Zorah is also the name of an Egyptian sun god which is in line with other sun-worshipping villages in the area, Eshtaol (valley of fire) and Bet Shemesh (house of sun) – see comment to verse 24 below.

Abarim publ'ns on internet: Dan comes from the verb, din – to judge, govern, contend or plead. It describes a more natural government by people who are naturally equipped to lead (who are wise and strong), in contrast to the governing done by some formal government, which consists of people that obtained their positions through their abilities to please the king.

Abarim: The noun, Manoah, means either a place or condition of rest. The verb, nuah, denotes a coming to rest usually after a period of unrest or mobility.

3 An angel of YHVH appeared to the woman and said: "Behold, you're barren and have not given birth but you'll conceive and bear a son.

Me: There are only three other women who were described as barren – Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. God closed Hannah's womb and Michal had no child until her dying day. But why is this woman anonymous? **Alter:** The reason she is nameless may be to enable the narrator to repeat the word "woman" repeatedly in this episode to stress Samson's involvement with women.

Plaut: Sarah and Hannah are the two other biblical figures who received divine announcements of their pregnancy.

Drazin: Samson is the only judge whose birth is foretold by an angel.

Fishbane: There is no account of any prayer for a child by Manoah or his wife. The divine messenger appears with the suddenness of unexpected grace. His prediction has the qualities of an oracle

Me: The angel does not volunteer any information about himself to her. Indeed, he will not tell her husband anything, even under questioning. Revelation will only materialise miraculously.

4 Now be aware, I pray you, do not drink wine or strong drink, and do not eat any impure thing.

Wikipedia: There is considerable evidence in Philistia for a large industry in fermented drink. Archaeological finds include breweries, wineries, and retail shops marketing beer and wine.

Plaut: Anything unclean is ritually forbidden, especially for a Nazir. Here the restriction is imposed on the pregnant mother, an illuminating precursor of modern-day medical caution.

Judith Abrams: Because of Samson's special destiny to be a lifelong Nazirite, his mother is told by the angel to keep the Nazirite rules herself so that the foetus is pure as it develops in her womb.

5 For, behold, you will conceive, and bear a son; no razor shall come upon his head; for the lad will be a Nazirite to Elohim from the womb and he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

Alter: The Nazirite is a person who takes on himself special vows of abstinence. The noun derives from the verb, nazar – to separate. **BDB:** Nazar – to dedicate, consecrate, devote, separate.

Me: "All the days of his vow of abstinence, no razor shall pass over his head; until the completion of the term that he abstains for the sake of YHVH, it shall be sacred, and he shall allow the growth of the hair of his head to grow wild [Num. 6:5]."

Me: When the Torah discusses the Nazirite (Num. 6: 1-21), it is clearly referring to a voluntary period of ascetism. Here, it is compulsory, imposed on the fetus by God. To conceive her first child, Samuel, Hannah "vowed a vow", and said to God "if ... You will give [me] a man-child, I shall give him to YHVH all the days of his life and no razor shall come upon his head." [1 Sam. 1:11].

Plaut: In the Torah, the Nazir is forbidden contact with the dead. Samson is not, which makes it possible for him to kill so many of the enemy. Furthermore, Samson's parents were not bidden to keep their son away from grapes, wine or beer.

Alter: "he will begin to save" – the angel chooses his words carefully: any victory Samson achieves over the Philistines will be incomplete.

Boling: Compare this to the panicked people in 10:18 who ask, "Who will start to fight Ammon?" The verb "begin" appears here and in 13:25 when the spirit of God drives Samson and in 16:22 when Samson's hair starts to re-grow.

Me: Samson will start the resistance and perish in the process. Saul will continue the fight and also die. David will finish the job.

Me: I have found one commentator who has expressed any discomfort in God manipulating a human being from the womb onwards to accomplish a divine plan. Please read Exum on last page.

Drazin: The angel gave the woman three instructions: i) no wine or strong drinks; ii) no unclean foods; and iii) no shaving the son's head. **Me:** The number three appears many times – see v. 15:4.

6 The woman came and told her husband, saying: “A **man of Elohim** came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of Elohim, very awesome; I did not ask him from where he was and he did not tell me his name,

Plaut: *Man of God is a title bestowed on the prophet Elisha. Me: How did she know he was a Man of God? Did she mean a prophet? And how would she know what an angel looked like?*

7 but he said to me: Behold, you will conceive and bear a son; now do not drink wine or strong drink, and do not eat any impure thing; for the lad will be a Nazirite to God from the womb **to the day of his death.**”

BDB: *Exceptional that he would be a Nazirite from conception to death; usually a voluntary act and for a limited time. Me: The angel never said that the child would be a Nazirite until he died.*

Alter: *It is noteworthy that she says nothing about the ban on cutting the hair. Me: This will prove to be Samson’s undoing. Polzin: She does not tell Manoah about the son’s destiny as a saviour.*

8 Then Manoah entreated YHVH, and said: “Oh, My Master, the man of Elohim whom You sent, please let him come again to us, and teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born.”

9 Elohim listened to Manoah’s voice; the angel of Elohim came again to the woman as she was sitting in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her.

10 The woman hurried and ran, and told her husband, and said to him: “Behold, the man has appeared to me who came to me that day.”

11 Manoah arose, went after his wife, and came to the man, and said: “Are you the man that spoke to the woman?” And he said: “I am.”

12 Manoah said: “Now when your words come to pass, **what shall be the rule for the child and what shall be done for him?**”

13 The angel of YHVH said to Manoah: “From all that I said to the woman let her beware.

14 She may not eat of anything that comes from the grapevine, and she may not drink wine or strong drink, or eat any impure thing; all that I commanded her let her observe.”

Plaut: *The angel does not answer Manoah’s questions. Me: The only thing that the angel mentioned about the child was that no razor should be used on his head, i.e., his hair must remain intact.*

Alter: *Once again, there is no mention of the ban on cutting the hair, as though this were a secret shared between the angel and the woman that neither will entrust to Manoah.*

Me: *The angel spells out the dietary restrictions for the mother but does not say that any of them must apply to the child. Furthermore, the child is not forbidden from contact with the dead.*

Me: *The angel does not even tell Manoah that the child will be a Nazirite. Only the mother knows that. Why is Manoah not to be trusted with this information?*

15 Manoah said to the angel of YHVH: “I pray you, let us detain you, that we may make ready a young goat before you.”

16 The angel of YHVH said to Manoah: “Even if you detain me, I will not eat of your bread; if you will make a burnt-offering to YHVH, offer it up.” For Manoah did not know that he was an angel of the YHVH.

17 Manoah said to the angel of YHVH: “What is your name, that when your words come to pass, we may do you honour?”

18 The angel of YHVH said to him: “**Why do you ask for my name, it is inscrutable?**”

Hertz: *This messenger of God responds the same way as Jacob’s wrestling opponent at Penuel [Gen. 32:30].*

Me: **אֲלֹהִים** comes from the noun for wonder – peh-lamed-aleph. The angel says that his name is too wondrous, too extraordinary, too difficult for a human to understand.

19 Manoah took the kid and meal-offering, offered it up on the rock to YHVH; and **he acted wondrously**, and Manoah and his wife did see.

Me: *cf. v.18 - the angel worked wonders [BDB]. Gideon asks his angel where were God’s wonderful deeds [Judg. 6:13]. Song of Moses: “Too awesome for praises, performing wonders!” [Ex.15:11]*

Me: *The same root is used in the Torah: “Man or woman, should anyone act exceptionally to make a Nazirite vow to keep himself apart (to nazir himself) for YHVH” [Num. 6:2] - Alter translation*

20 For it came to pass, when the **flame** went up from the altar to heaven, that the angel of YHVH ascended in the flame of the altar; and Manoah and his wife watched; and they fell on their faces to the earth.

Alter: *The pyrotechnic exit announces the motif of fire that will recur, both literally and figuratively, in Samson’s story.*

Plaut: *Gideon had a similar experience [Judg. 6:21].*

21 The angel of YHVH did not appear again to Manoah or to his wife; then Manoah knew that he was the angel of YHVH.

22 Manoah said to his wife: “We shall surely die, because we have seen Elohim.”

Me: Compare with what Gideon says when he realises that he has been conversing with an angel [Judg. 6:22].

23 His wife said to him: “If YHVH desired to kill us, He would not have taken from our hand a burnt-offering and a meal-offering; and He would not have shown us all these things or made us listen at this time to these things.”

Alter: The annunciation-type scene is fundamentally matriarchal, the revelations being vouchsafed to the future mother, but here we are given a virtually satirical version, highlighting male obtuseness and the good sense of the woman. This scene becomes a perfect prelude to the story of a brawny male hero whose lapses of judgement regarding women entangle him in repeated difficulties and ultimately destroy him.

Drazin: The wife offers the husband three reasons why they were not going to die: i) God accepted their sacrifice; ii) God showed them a miracle; and iii) God told them they would have a son.

Hamblin: Manoah’s faith is traditional and rational, but slow to recognise the presence of God. On the other hand, his wife has an intuitive faith. She senses the supernatural and knows in her heart that “God cannot be expressed but only addressed” (John Gray). Manoah would probably see his son’s life in a moralistic light as a story of broken vows, brutish behaviour, the profligate wasting of a consecrated life and a fatal weakness for Philistine women. His wife would be more ready to see her son’s life and death in relation to the “great deliverance” from the Philistines.

24 The woman bore a son and called his name **Samson [Shimshon]**; the child grew and **YHVH blessed him**.

Abarim: **Shimshon** means Sun Man, coming from the noun shemesh, the sun. **Alter:** The suffix, on, could be related to potency. The link with the sun is another warrant for the fire motif. Mythologically, our hero bears some resemblance to Hercules, a muscular hero who performs arduous labours.

Me: In Egypt are to be found the remains of Heliopolis, the city of the sun, celebrated for its worship to the sun-god Ra. The obelisk, Cleopatra’s Needle, came from there. In the Tenach, the city was called i) **On**, the residence of Potiphera, priest and father-in-law to Joseph [Genesis 41:45 and 50]; and ii) **Bet Shemesh** (sun city) [Jeremiah 43:13]. Rashi thinks that **Isaiah [19:18]** was referring to the Egyptian Bet Shemesh when he described it as the City of **Heres** – please the comment to 14:18 below.

Plaut: In the Psalms, God is described as a sun: “For a sun and a shield is YHVH Elohim” [Ps.84:12].

Hamblin: Of all the judges, Samson is the only one to be **blessed by God** – not for a successful marriage, children, long life, prosperity and happiness, but the strength to defeat the Philistines.

25 And **the spirit of YHVH** began to **move** him in the camp of Dan, between Zorah and **Eshtaol**.

Alter: The carefully chosen verb, **pa’am**, is unique to Samson. It means to pound/pulsate within him, and neatly adumbrates his career of intermittent, violent action.

Me: Gesenius suggests that **Eshtaol** might be the hitpael of sha’al, i.e., to ask of oneself.

Drazin: **Spirit of YHVH** was on Othniel [Judg. 3:10] and Jephthah [Judg. 11:29] and clothed Gideon [Judg. 6:34]. In every case, they were going into battle.

Hamblin: The Philistines are unaware that God intends to conduct a guerrilla war against them and his secret weapon is Samson.

Judges Chapter 14

1 Samson went down to **Timnah** and saw a **woman** in Timnah from the daughters of the Philistines.

Wikipedia: Modern archaeologists identify the ancient site with **Tel Batash**, a tell lying on a flat, alluvial plain, located in the **Sorek Valley** c. 4 miles north-west of **Beit Shemesh**.

Alter: The first common noun that appears in the Samson narrative is “**woman**.” “Woman” is also the very first word of dialogue assigned to Samson.

2 He went up, and told his father and his mother, and said: “A woman have I seen in Timnah from the daughters of the Philistines; now take her for me to be a wife.”

Drazin: **Deuteronomy 7:3** only prohibits marrying among the seven nations that lived in Canaan, but the rabbis forbade any intermarriage.

3 His father and mother said to him: “Is there not a woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you go to take a wife from the **uncircumcised** Philistines?” And Samson said to his father: “You, take her for me; for she is right in my eyes.”

Alter: “**Uncircumcised**” is a recurrent epithet for the Philistines, a people of Hellenic origin, and is not used for the Canaanites. Samson’s sexual partner was begotten by an uncircumcised male.

4 His father and mother did not know it was from YHVH; for **He was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines**. At that time, the **Philistines ruled over Israel**.

Alter: The theological explanation is a little shaky: God knows that the only way to get this particular hero to act against the Philistines is to involve him with a woman, which will lead to his being tricked by her countrymen, which then will provoke him to vengeance. **Steinsaltz:** Samson’s desire for this Philistine woman was a tool of divine providence.

Steinsaltz: “Ruled” - manifested primarily through taxes that the Israelites were compelled to pay. The Philistines were militarily very powerful and could enforce their rule even over Judah.

Hamblin: Opportunity – it is possible that the Philistines planned to use the valley of Sorek, overlooked by Zorah where Samson’s parents lived, as a prime invasion route for the expansion of their economic and political power. A century later, the Philistines followed the same route up through the Sorek valley to the Rephaim valley around Jerusalem to block David’s rise to power [2 Sam.5]

5 Samson, his father and mother went down to Timnah, and came to the vineyards of Timnah; and a young lion was roaring towards him.

Drazin: Two other tales about conquering lions appear in 1 Samuel 17:34 – 37 (David) and II Samuel 23:20 (Benayahu). There are also stories about Gilgamesh and Hercules killing lions.

6 And the spirit of YHVH rushed on him and he tore it into two as one would a kid, and he had nothing in his hand; but he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.

Alter: Divine inspiration enables violent action by Samson; it is not the charisma of an ad-hoc military leader. All his heroic acts are performed by Samson alone.

Alter: Samson has a penchant for secrets, but he gets himself into trouble when he reveals his secrets to women.

Hamblin: Just as Jeremiah spoke of the Babylonians as “a lion.... a destroyer of nations”, we may see this lion as a symbol for the contemporary enemy of Samson’s time, the Philistines. Note that he was only able to overcome the lion by the power of God’s Spirit.

7 He went down and spoke to the woman; and she was right in the eyes of Samson.

8 After a while he returned to take her and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion; and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey.

Me: link to Deborah. **Boling:** Honey held enlightening and courage-producing potential, as it did for Jonathan [1 Sam. 14:24-30]. **Hamblin:** Honey from a carcass = “life from death” (Ambrose).

9 And he scraped it out into his palms and went on, eating as he went, and he went to his father and mother, and gave them, and they ate; but he did not tell them not that he had scraped the honey out of the body of the lion.

Alter: Carcasses are considered to be ritually unclean, so that by taking food from the lion’s corpse, Samson is violating one of the terms of the Nazarite vow.

Me: “All the days that he abstains for YHVH, he shall not come into contact with the dead” [Num. 6:5].

10 His father went down to the woman; and Samson made there a feast; for so would the young men do.

Me: The Hebrew for a feast is Mishte, from shatah - to drink, which does suggest that alcohol was imbibed. If I am right, wine and strong drink were not forbidden to Samson.

11 It came to pass, when they saw him, they took thirty of their companions and they were with him.

12 And Samson said to them: “Let me pose a riddle to you; if you will surely tell me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes,

Matthews: Wisdom is equated with the skill of telling riddles [Prov. 1:6].

Steinsaltz: Celebrating for seven days following a wedding is an ancient custom mentioned long before Samson’s time (the festivities following Leah’s marriage to Jacob – Gen. 29:27).

Drazin: The number 7 also appears frequently: i) the wedding feast lasts 7 days; ii) Samson give his guests the 7 feast days to solve the riddle; iii) his wife weeps for all the 7 feast days; iv) Samson has 7 confrontations with the Philistines (1 unsuccessful and 6 successful; v) Samson tells Delilah that he would be weakened if he were bound with 7 moist ropes that had never been dried; vi) the Philistines supply her with 7 moist bowstrings that had never been dried; and vii) Samson also tells Delilah he would be weakened if his 7 locks of hair were woven into the loom.

13 but if you are unable to tell me, then you will give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.” And they said to him: “Pose your riddle, that we may hear it.”

14 He said: “Out of the eater came forth food and out of the strong came forth sweetness.” For three days they could not solve the riddle.

Alter: It is an unfair riddle because it depends on unique circumstances known only to the riddler.

Hamblin: Out of the eater (the old destructive order) came forth food (the seven biblical products of the Promised Land); out of the strong (the Philistines) came forth sweetness (a land of honey)

15 It came to pass on the seventh day, that they said to Samson’s wife: “Entice your husband, that he may disclose to us the riddle, lest we burn you and your father’s house with fire; did you call us here to impoverish us?”

Alter: The Philistines are clearly suggesting that she use her feminine wiles on her husband by seducing him.

Alter: The fire motif introduced in the annunciation scene enters the story proper. This is an offer that the woman cannot refuse.

Alter: The Philistines accuse her of conspiring against them with her Israelite husband. **Me:** That will be one of the themes – to whom do the women pledge their loyalty – Samson or Philistia?

Edward L. Greenstein: *A similar threat was made by the Ephraimites against Gideon [Judg. 12:1].*

16 Samson's wife wept before him and said: "You only hate me, and do not love me; you have posed a riddle to the sons of my people and you did not disclose it to me?" And he said to her: 'Behold, I have not told my father or mother, but I should tell you?"

17 She wept before him the seven days, while their feast lasted; and it came to pass on the seventh day, that he told her because she pestered him; and she disclosed the riddle to the sons of her people.

18 On the seventh day the men of the city said to him before the **sun** set: "What is sweeter than honey and what is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them: "If you had not **ploughed** with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."

Alter: *The word for **sun**, harsah, is archaic and poetic. **Me:** It comes from **heres**, which appears in **Judg. 1:35** – the Amorites wanted to stay on Mt **Heres**; **Judg. 2:9** – Joshua was buried in Timnat-**Heres**; and **Judg. 8:13** – Gideon returned with his Midianite kings as captives while the sun (**heres**) was still high – please see the comment to **13:24** above.*

Alter: *The **ploughing** image is obviously sexual: if you had not played around with my wife, she would not have revealed the secret to you. Samson has no notion that his wife acted under a death-threat but instead imagines that she has been unfaithful to him – perhaps, with 30 different men. He departs enraged not only against the 30 "companions" but also against his wife.*

Me: *Samson's riddle was a mischievous prank which had fatal consequences for his wife, his father-in-law and well over 1030 Philistines. And presumably all deaths were endorsed by God.*

19 The spirit of YHVH rushed on him and he went down to Ashkelon, smote thirty of their men, took the clothes they were wearing and gave the changes of clothes to the disclosers of the riddle. And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house.

20 But Samson's wife became his companion's, whom he had befriended.

Judges Chapter 15

1 And it came to pass after a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, that Samson visited his wife with a kid; and he said: "I will go into my wife into the chamber." But her father would not give him access.

2 Her father said: "I had truly said that you really hated her; and I gave her to your companion; is her younger sister not better than she? Let her, I pray you, be yours in her stead."

Me: *Is this a humorous or ironic reversal of the Jacob story where he loved Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, and never wanted to marry the older daughter, Leah, who became the hated one?*

Drazin: *The offer of a younger daughter to replace a promised older one is reminiscent of King Saul giving David's intended to another man and offering him Michal in her stead [1 Sam. 18:17-28].*

3 Samson said to them: "This time I am absolved of the Philistines, for I am going to do them harm."

4 Samson went and caught **300 foxes**, took **torches** and turned them tail to tail, and placed one torch between every two tails.

Me: ***3 + its multiples:** 3,000 Judahites, 3,000 people on a roof, 300 foxes, 30 companions, 30 sets of clothes, 3 lies to Delilah, 3 liaisons with women and 3 times the Spirit of God comes on Samson.*

Alter: *Samson, himself a feral hero, is repeatedly involved with animals – the lion, foxes and the jawbone of an ass. **Me:** Another set of 3.*

Steinsaltz: *The Hebrew, **shu'alim**, might refer to jackals, which are of the same family and easier to capture in large numbers because they live in packs.*

Me: *Torches is expressed in the masculine form – lappidim. It still reminds us of Deborah's husband, Lappidot [Judg. 4:4].*

5 And when he had set the torches on **fire**, he sent them into the standing grain of the Philistines and burnt the stack of sheaves, the standing corn, and the olive groves.

Boling: *Samson is the guerrilla fighter par excellence but a very poor follower and organiser. He is the complete antithesis of the judges who relied on teamwork.*

6 The Philistines said: "Who has done this?" And they said: "Samson, son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife, and gave her to his companion." And the Philistines went up and **burnt her and her father with fire**.

Alter: *Fire answers fire now, and it is in the nature of uncontrolled fire to destroy everything in its path, much like Samson.*

Polzin: *How ironic. Samson's wife tries to avoid her fate by discovering the answer to the riddle which provokes her husband into murdering 30 innocent men and leaving her. The latter action prompts her father to get her re-married which only incites Samson to destroy the Philistine's grain harvest and olive crop, which only results in the Philistines incinerating her and her father.*

7 Samson said to them: “If you act like this, I will take vengeance against you, and after that I will cease.”

8 And he smote them **calf upon thigh**, a great slaughter; and he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

Alter: *Calf or hip on thigh – a murderous thrashing.*

9 The Philistines went up and encamped in Judah and spread themselves across **Lehi**.

Alter: *The Hebrew, l'chi, means a jawbone. Me: You may recognise LEHI, which was the acronym for the Stern Gang who fought the British in Palestine between 1940 and 1948.*

10 The Judahites said: “Why have you come up against us?” They said: “To **bind** Samson have we come up, to do to him as he did to us.”

Alter: *This unbending code of vengeful retaliation is fully shared by Samson and the Philistines.*

11 Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson: “Don’t you know that the Philistines rule over us? What is this that you have done to us?” And he said to them: “As they did to me, so have I done to them.”

12 They said to him: “We have come down to **bind** you, to give you into the hand of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them: ‘Swear to me, that you will not fall on me.’”

13 They said to him, saying: “No; but we will surely **bind** you and give you into their hand; but we will not put you to death.” And they **bound** him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

14 He came to Lehi and the Philistines shouted as they met him; and the spirit of YHVH rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that was burnt with **fire**, and his **bonds** dropped off (lit. melted) from his hands.

15 He found a fresh jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand and took it, and smote a thousand men with it.

Alter: *The second time that Samson the Nazirite comes into contact with an animal carcass.*

Drazin: *Samson’s use of a non-military implement to kill his enemy is reminiscent of Shamgar killing 600 Philistines with an ox goad [Judg. 3:31].*

16 And Samson said: “With the jawbone of an **ass**, **heaps upon heaps**, with the jawbone of an ass have I smitten a thousand men.”

Boling: *Wordplay involving the Hebrew words for donkey (hamor) and heaps (hamorim) which are identical. For the same construction of absolute followed by dual to achieve the same effect of impassioned speech, see “one girl” (racham) and “two girls” (rachamatayim) and “dyed garment” (rikmah) and “dyed garments” (rikmatayim) in the Song of Deborah [Judg. 4: 30].*

17 It came to pass, when he had finished speaking, that he cast the jawbone from his hand; and he **called** that place **Ramat-Lehi**.

Alter: *Ramat-Lehi means “casting of the jawbone.” Me: It could also mean “Jawbone Height” or “Jawbone Hill.”*

18 And he was very thirsty, and **called to** YHVH, and said: “You have put in the hand of Your servant this great salvation; and now shall I die of thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?”

Me: *Samson is testing God. If God complies, then Samson will have achieved a triple success – i) his thirst will be quenched; ii) he will know that God approved of his latest victory; and iii) he will assume that God will support him in any future confrontations with the enemy.*

19 God cleaved the hollow that was in Lehi, and water came forth from it; and he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived; therefore he **called** its name **En-Hakoreh**, which is in Lehi to this day.

Alter: *En-HaKoreh means “spring of the one who calls out.” Polzin: Calling in v.17 is really naming. Samson thinks he is in control. He knows how to kill and wishes to commemorate his victory. He has power and authority. And immediately he acknowledges his weakness, for he then calls to God in v.18 for water. Calling here is crying out or appealing. Samson is helpless; he does not have the knowledge or the strength to solve his problem. He is powerless and has no authority in the presence of God. Ironically, his calling in v.19 is a memorial to his deficiencies.*

Me: *With his superhuman strength, Samson could not have achieved what God did?*

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

Daniel Elazar: *More than any other, Samson is a warrior. He has few qualities needed to hold public office other than great strength and courage. He does not have any public-spirited interest.*

Judges Chapter 16

1 Samson went to **Gaza**, saw a prostitute there and went into her.

2 To the Gazites (it was told) saying: “Samson has come here.” And they surrounded him and lay in wait for him all night at the **gate of the city**, and were quiet all the night, saying: “Until light of the morning light and we will kill him.”

3 Samson lay till midnight and arose at midnight, grasped the doors of the **city gate** and the two doorposts, pulled them up with the bar, put them on his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of the mountain that is **before Hebron**.

*Me: More irony. The people of Gaza thought that they had trapped Samson within the locked **city gate**. They were safe and he was insecure. Samson takes advantage of their reluctance to capture him at night and removes the gate, the source of their safety. Now they are insecure, defenceless from marauders.*

*Hamblin: Samson has symbolically possessed the **gates** of the enemy thus fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham [Gen.22:17]. Depositing the gate “**before Hebron**,” which was David’s first capital, is a premonition of David’s eventual subjugation of the Philistines.*

4 And it was after that, that he fell in love with a woman in **Nahal-Sorek**, and her name was **Delilah**.

*Me: **Nahal-Sorek** = Wadi of Choice Vines (BDB). Wikipedia: One of the largest, most important drainage basins in the Judean Hills, it formed the border between the Philistines and the Danites.*

*Me: **Delilah** could come from the noun dalah, hair hanging down or threads of warp hanging in a loom (BDB) – see verses 13-14.*

5 The **lords** of the Philistines went up to her and said: “Entice him; see where his great strength lies and by what means we may prevail against him, that we may **bind** him to afflict him; and each one of us will give you 1,100 **pieces of silver**.”

*Alter: Seranim - **overlords** - always appears in the plural; title of the rulers of the five (Me: Judges 3:3) major towns that comprise Philistia. Me: South-North: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath + Ekron*

*Me: Alter thinks that the currency was the shekel. From archaeology, Jewish Virtual Library says that a shekel at that time would have been around c. 10.4 grams. 5,500 shekalim would weigh 57.2kg. @ 1/12/20, **silver** was fetching c. \$760 per kg. So, Delilah’s haul for giving Samson up would be worth c. \$43,472 or c.£32,627 at today’s prices.*

*Steinsaltz: Excluding clothing and food, 10 **pieces of silver** was a respectable annual salary [Judg. 17:10].*

*Matthews: A **bound** Samson symbolises Israel in bondage. His ability to escape gives hope if Israel will return to God. But freedom from bondage does not mean freedom from God’s design.*

6 And Delilah said to Samson: 'Tell me, I pray you, wherein does your great strength lie, and by what could you be **bound** to afflict you?'

7 Samson said to her: 'If they **bind** me with seven moist ropes that were not dried, I will be weakened and be as any other man.'

8 The lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven moist bowstrings which had not been dried, and she **bound** him with them.

9 And the ambush was waiting for her in the chamber. And she said: “The Philistines are upon you, Samson.” He snapped the bowstrings as a thread of tow is snapped when it smells of **fire**. And his strength was not known.

10 Delilah said to Samson: “Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies; now tell me, I pray you, with what could you be **bound**?”

11 He said to her: “If they truly **bind** me with new ropes with which no work has been done, I will be weakened and be as any other man.”

12 So Delilah took new ropes, **bound** him with them and said: “The Philistines are upon you, Samson.” And the ambush was waiting in the chamber. And he snapped them from off his arms like a thread.

13 Delilah said to Samson: “Until now you have mocked me and spoken lies to me; tell me with what you could be **bound**.” He said to her: “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the (loom’s) web.”

Alter: In this explanation, Samson edges towards the real secret by involving his hair. It also comes close to his actual predicament because it conjures up his entanglement in a woman’s web.

14 She fastened it with the pin (of the loom) and said: “The Philistines are upon you, Samson.” He awoke from his sleep and pulled out the pin of the loom and the web.

15 She said to him: “How can you say: ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me?” You have mocked me these three times and you have not told me by what your strength is great.”

Me: Samson has been toying with her just as he did with his wedding guests. Once again, there will be fatal repercussions for the Philistines but also for Samson. Only Delilah will escape and live to profit from the experience.

16 And it came to pass, when she pestered him with her words daily and urged him, that his soul was worn out to death.

17 And he told her all his heart and said: "A razor has not been on my head for I have been a Nazirite of Elohim from my mother's womb; if I were shaved, then my strength would leave me and I would be weakened, and I would be like any other man."

18 Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, and she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying: "Come up this once, for he has told me all his heart." And the lords of the Philistines went up to her and brought up the money in their hand.

Polzin: Three times *Delilah* had tested Samson. Now she knew instinctively that he had told her the truth. A test is meant to give assurance, proof or certitude. *Ehud* does not ask the Israelites to follow him and believe in God until he has assassinated Eglon. *Barak* is unwilling to obey God's command until he has the surety of Deborah's company at Mt Tabor. *Gideon* wants a sign to know who is speaking to him. Twice he gives God a woolly test and he has to hear his enemy interpret a dream in his favour before he can believe with confidence that God has given Midian into his hands. Even *God* uses a winnowing water test to ensure that the Israelites will attribute their imminent victory to Him rather than to themselves. *Jephthah* has to guarantee his victory over the Ammonites with a rash and ultimately tragic vow to God. *Manoah* informs the angel that it will be when his words come true that he will honour him. *Manoah's wife* considers the acceptance of the angel's acceptance of their sacrifice a test of his good will towards them; God will not kill them. And *Samson* testily appeals to God that He should not let him die of dehydration.

Drazin: She knew he spoke the truth because he would never use God's name in vain [*Talmud Bavli Sotah 9*].

19 She made him sleep upon her knees and she called for a man; she shaved off the seven locks of his head and began to afflict him but his strength had left him.

Me: Examples of men tricked by women, be it for good or ill: i) Does Eve dupe Adam or was he not standing next to her? ii) Lot's daughters get their father Lot drunk and both get pregnant by him; iii) Rebecca tricks her husband Isaac into giving the blessing for the firstborn to Jacob; iv) Leah tricks Jacob into marrying her first; v) Rachel never reveals to her father Laban that she stole his teraphim; vi) Tamar tricks her father-in-law Judah into making her pregnant; vii) two midwives thwart Pharaoh's plan to wipe out all Israelite male babies; viii) Pharaoh's daughter shelters Moses in her father's palace; ix) Rahab helps Joshua's spies to escape from the clutches of Jericho's defenders; x) Yael befriends Sisera and murders him; xi) Delilah betrays Samson who loved her; xii) Batsheva seduces King David; xiii) Jezebel concocts a legal case which proves fatal for her subject Naboth; and xiiii) Esther invites Haman to a private feast with the king to expose his antisemitism.

20 She said: 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson.' And he awoke from his sleep and said: 'I will go out like the other times and shake myself free.' But he did not know that YHVH had departed from him.

Exum: "like the other times" – a moment of hubris. **Me:** He is caught because he took his strength for granted. If he had appreciated its source, maybe he would have preserved the secret. By revealing it to Delilah, he disrespected the gift from God and undermined God's plan to dismantle the Philistines.

21 They seized him and bore out his eyes; they took him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze fetters; he was a grinder in the prison.

Alter: Samson lost the eyes that chased women who were nothing but trouble. Gouging out the eyes was also a punishment for a rebellious vassal [*2 Kings 25:7*].

Exum: Freedom from an obsessive trait does not necessarily bring with it a deeper self-understanding.

Me: Was this conscious revenge on the part of the Philistines or more irony on the part of the narrator? Samson is taken to the city from which he escaped by removing the city gate.

Polzin: Samson's physical blindness is an emblematic climax to his lack of understanding as to why God had so far delivered him from his enemies.

Me: Binding Samson is mentioned 15 times – five sets of three.

22 But the hair of his head began to grow after he had been shaved.

23 The lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and for rejoicing; and they said: "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand."

Dancy: Dagon was a West Semitic corn god whom the Philistines had adopted on entry to the country. **Me:** It is believed they came from Crete c.1200 BCE.

Abarim publ'ns: Moderns view Dagon as the god of cereals - Hebrew dagan. Archaic sources say a fish-god from the Hebrew dag. There's also dagah – to multiply/increase. **Me:** BDB is unsure.

24 And the people saw him and praised their god; for they said: "Our god has given into our hand our enemy and the destroyer of our land who multiplied our slain."

Matthews: To give an idea of the gravity of the competition for use of the land, "enemy" peoples are mentioned 919 times in the biblical narrative and 423 (46%) of these refer to the Philistines.

Polzin: "our" is repeated eight times in two speeches that comprise 18 Hebrew words. The Philistines' words of praise and rejoicing are as excessively egocentric as Samson's.

25 It came to pass, when their hearts were merry, they said: "Call for Samson, that he may amuse us." And they called for Samson from the prison and he amused them; and they stood him between the pillars.

26 Samson said to the lad who was holding his hand: "Let me rest and feel the pillars on which the temple rests, that I may lean on them."

27 The temple was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there; on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women watching Samson's entertainment.

28 Samson called to YHVH and said: "YHVH, Elohim, remember me, I pray You, and strengthen me, I pray You, just this once, O Elohim, that I may take one act of vengeance from the Philistines for my two eyes."

Exum: The unfolding of the climax is splendidly manipulated by the skilful employment of paronomasia (a pun, a play on words). The Philistines assemble to praise their god for victory over their Israelite enemy, but in the end God (through Samson), not Dagon, is the victor. The Philistines rejoice over the captivity of one who had greatly multiplied their slain and, ironically, these very merry-makers become the slain who outnumber those he killed in life. The crowning pun revolves around Samson's prayer: the people called for Samson to amuse them but, while they watch, Samson calls on God. Dagon's festival turns into God's victory. God has the last laugh.

Alter: In his last moment, Samson turns in prayer to God. He feels that his great strength as returned but he is unsure. Also, he recognises that its ultimate source is God.

Plaut: Just how and when Samson exercised the functions of leadership remains untold. Neither he nor Jewish tradition ever forgot that his physical prowess was a gift of God and was on loan.

Exum: Even as he is about to die, Samson lacks any deeper understanding of his role or of God's aims. He asks not that he might bring glory to God or to Israel, but for personal vengeance.

Polzin: No character is less deserving of deliverance and victory than Samson himself. As ever, his words reveal the same egocentric obliviousness to the affairs of God and the welfare of Israel.

Exum: God's departure from Samson, when he was shaved, was not final; rather, God is a responsive deity who can be swayed by prayer.

Exum: Twice, Samson calls on God. The first is for water, after killing 1000 Philistines, so that he may live. The second is for strength, before killing 3000+ Philistines, so that he may die. These two episodes make the same crucial point: ultimately the strong man cannot save himself; Samson depends on God to preserve his life and to grant his plea for death.

Me: There is no explicit confirmation that God answered Samson's petition. As Samson seems to have been a mere pawn in the divine plan, God intervened because Samson's new role as jester was a golden opportunity to bring the house down on the heads of the five overlords of the Philistines and their guests.

29 Samson grasped the two central pillars on which the temple rested, and laid his hands on them, one with his right and one with his left.

30 And Samson said: "Let my soul die with the Philistines." And he bent with all his might; and the temple fell on the lords and on all the people that were in it. And the dead whom he put to death at his death were more than those that he put to death in his life.

Alter: Samson's career against the Philistines ended in an act of wholesale destruction. His fire had consumed everything in its path and eventually caught up with him.

Me: Samson's death is the second suicide in the Tenach. Avimelech is mortally wounded and orders his armour-bearer to finish him off [Judg. 9:54]. To prevent himself being run through by the Philistines, King Saul orders his armour-bearer to kill him but the latter refuses. Saul falls on his bodyguard's sword and the latter follows his sovereign [1 Sam. 31:4-5].

Hamblin: Peace activist Prof. Yehezkel Landau expressed concern about the "Samson Syndrome" [Jerusalem Post, 11/8/85] among some Israelis who would take the entire Arab world with them into the abyss of annihilation rather than accept any accommodation with the Palestinians.

31 Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, bore him off and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the grave of Manoah his father. And he had judged Israel twenty years.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE STORY, ITS THEMES AND ITS PRINCIPAL CHARACTER

Steinsaltz: Samson was a complicated, highly unconventional leader. Throughout his life he acted alone, without military backing, aided by the divine force that flowed through his veins.

Exum: Samson does not behave like other judges. He is the typical rogue. His wit and prowess enable the reader to have a good laugh at his enemy's expense. He constantly gets the better of them and the text shows a hearty approval of his unconventional conduct. He is a comic hero, not only in his ability to bounce back but also in his capacity to inflict pain on his enemies. He displays a remarkable absence of character development. What we can say is that he makes the same mistake repeatedly and does not learn. His story is an example of picaresque fiction.

Zeitlin: The narratives in Judges are not epics, the genre so typical of other nations: stories of heroes, demi-gods and gods. Samson is something of a hero but only with YHWH's grace. These narratives are the very antithesis of pagan hubris.

Fishbane: The Torah shows how the natural self may become transformed for a time, fully consecrated to God. Deliberate abstinence approximates to priestly sanctity. Devotion to God is expressed through self-limitation and restraint, perhaps re-balancing one's spiritual life. The Book of Judges introduces an all-too-human self in whom the spirit of supernatural energy reverberates. Samson embodies the force of destiny. Assuming a sacred status will infuse him with powers that transcend ordinary limits. A man, who has not chosen his lifelong Nazirite status, will devote his transformed and consecrated condition to self-centred acts of revenge. His private passions will fuel and direct his service to the community. Only derivatively and accidentally will they benefit others.

Polzin: Samson is *par excellence* the unknowing judge. He appears never to have had any concern for the interests of Israel, nor any knowledge of the role predicted for him by the angel.

Matthews: Are superhumans always destined to be brought down by their own hubris (see Gilgamesh and Hercules for other examples)?

Bible Study Magazine: While Samson is unlike any other hero of Israel, his story rivals the stories of Greek myth. His uncanny resemblance to figures like Achilles and Heracles is surprising. Why the similarities? The Israelites had their own epic tradition, which often drew on Greek myth. The Phoenicians, neighbours to the Israelites and trading partners with the Greeks, are the likeliest explanation for this influence. Also, the Philistines, who often warred with the Israelites, had nearly the same culture as Homer's Mycenaean Greeks.

Me: Samson and Hercules were individualists, fearless risk-takers, had superhuman strength, killed lions bare-handed and bore city gates on their backs. Both committed suicide.

Exum: Strictly speaking, Samson's death is not a suicide, for death is in God's hands. God's power, not Samson's own or some mysterious force that resides in his hair, enables Samson to kill Philistines and die in the process.

Polzin: All man's attempts to grasp the truth and understand his situation can painfully miss the mark. Confident in his own knowledge, man steps forward toward failure and disaster. The central theme of the Book of Judges is man doing "what is right in his own eyes" [Judg. 17:6 + 21:25].

Exum: Samson lived on the margins of two cultures, Israelite and Philistine. His isolation was symbolised pre-eminently by his status as a lifelong Nazirite. He is an Israelite who preferred the company of Philistines. He fought alone, motivated by personal grievances and his incredible strength rendered him different, not “like other men.” He had no close family or tribal ties (except for his parents who soon disappear from the scene), and he died without offspring.

Polzin: Ignorance is a recurrent theme in this story: i) The angel is unwilling to declare his identity to either of Samson’s parents but will reveal it when he ascends in the flames of the sacrifice; ii) Manoah is never told by the angel or his wife anything about how the child shall be brought up and his destiny; iii) Neither parent is told by God or one of his divine messengers that Samson’s marriage to a Philistine woman is part of God’s plan against the Philistines; iv) Samson appears to remain ignorant of his role as deliverer of his people. He does not seem to be told either by his mother or by God; v) Samson never tells his parents about his confrontation with a lion; vi) Samson thought that his 30 Philistine guests would remain ignorant of the solution to his riddle but eventually disclosed the answer to his wife; vii) His wife never tells him of the death-threat made by his guests; viii) Samson’s father-in-law never tells him that, following Samson leaving the marital home, he has arranged for Samson’s wife to be re-married to one of Samson’s Philistine companions; ix) Samson thought that he could keep the secret of his strength but Delilah wore him down; x) When he woke up after being shorn of his locks, Samson did not know that (the spirit of) God had abandoned him; xi) It is unclear if Delilah ever revealed his secret to his Philistine captors? If she did, why did they forget to shave his head and allow him to regain his strength? Ultimately, the narrator is emphasising God’s omniscience.

Exum: There are enough points of contact with Saul’s narrative to merit Wellhausen’s designation of Samson as a Vorspiel (prelude) to Saul.

Exum: A comparison of the treatment of the two heroes shows how little Samson is held accountable by God. The text does not make an issue of obedience. Demands for obedience, warnings against disobedience and homilies about the results of disobedience are strikingly absent in his story. This lack of specific moral judgment finds its most natural home in comedy.

Exum: Marginality may be separated into its comic and tragic modalities, which are represented by the trickster (Samson) and the scapegoat (Saul). Samson exhibits the contradictions associated with the well-known figure of a hoaxer, a marginal character with abnormal strength and an enormous libido, witty, uncontrollable, destructive, beneficial and self-destructive.

Exum: Everything that happens to Samson seems determined by God without his knowledge or consent, leaving Samson with little, if any, control over his own life. One could argue that his role as God’s instrument against the Philistines was no compensation for his personal loss, his blindness, his humiliation and death, because it was unwitting and because he was not offered a choice. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of his life is the fact that he was dispensable in God’s plan. What purpose did his life serve? He accomplished no lasting deliverance. He had no followers or supporters but remained an outsider. He was betrayed by his wife and by the woman he loved, as well as by the neighbouring tribe of Judah. Was he also betrayed by God?