A Gate in Gaza:
An Essay on the Reception of Tall Tales[*]

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Few who are aware of Tommy Thompson's work would want to tackle the historicity in the patriarchal narratives (or most biblical lore with historical contents, for that matter) without wishing to know more about the time, the circumstance and the setting for their origins. More, they might also want to ask why, how and when editors gave up further manipulations of these traditions, deciding that they have become too sacred (canonical may be another term) to mess with.

The Subject

In this paper, offered to a friend and colleague of several decades, I keep all these matters in mind, but actually deal with one narrow aspect of their reception: Were these narratives set as past events taken to be true accounts when read or heard by their earliest recipients? The issue is interesting because until the past couple of centuries, all but the fewest skeptics regularly relied on biblical narratives to chronicle the march of history. Even the occasional jolt to credulity – as in crossing a sea on foot, halting the sun in mid-course or surviving for days in a fish's innards – was accorded veracity through mumbo-jumbo science or via unverified survival-tales collected from far-off shores.

My exploration of this matter focuses on one episode from many concerned with Samson of the tribe of Dan: his visit with a prostitute in Gaza.[1] I hardly need to annotate too deeply the few verses that retell this incident (16:1-3) and I will take it for granted that anyone inspecting this essay would be familiar with the tales about Samson as told in Judges 13–16. The Gaza excursion comes after several confrontations with Philistines that invariably ended painfully for them. Heretofore, the bouts had occurred in and around Naḥal Sorek, mostly between Samson's birthplace (ṣŏrʿâ, Zorah) in Danite territory and Philistine Timnah, a stone's throw away from home.[2] The Gaza whoring interlude, however, occurs miles from these familiar spots, giving many occasions for later moralists to condemn consorting beyond marriage, especially with foreign women. Its local prostitute is nameless, as are all women characters through this juncture of the cycle.[3] In fact, subsequent to this episode, Samson will experience his deepest emotional entanglement in neighboring Naḥal Sorek when he falls in love with Delilah, a named courtesan of fluid ethnicity.[4]

The passage in the received Hebrew is brief enough to warrant full citation:

1. Unless specified otherwise, all citations are from the book of Judges. This essay is adapted from the second volume of an *Anchor Yale Bible* commentary on that book now in preparation. (The first volume is available as Sasson 2014.) I reserve detailed philological comments to its pages.

2. Some incidents found him by Ashkelon (Judg. 14:19) and by other places (Etam, Lehi) that are difficult to pinpoint on a map. See Rainey and Notley (2006: 141) for a succinct presentation of the matter.

3. Exum (2016: 48) playfully wonders (I am not sure why) whether she was an Israelite plying her trade in a foreign land.

4. Delilah's name betrays nothing about her foreign origin, as it is plausibly Semitic, whether Hebrew (*dālal*, 'to dangle') or Akkadian (*dalālum*, 'to praise'). In the literature, Delilah is commonly a Philistine because Samson's fate was to engage the Philistines, because in Timnah and in Gaza, Philistine women seem to attract him because Philistines would more likely trust one of their own to deceive Samson, and because a Hebrew woman (God forbid) would not betray her kin. Plausible enough, each and every explanation, except for the fact that in the Samson tales, his kin from Judah seem quite willing to hand him over to the Philistines (Judg. 15). In Judges too, Jael, not likely a Hebrew, deceived her own kind (Judg. 4). Then there are always Joseph's brothers and Judas as betrayers of one's own kith as well as the dozen kings of Judah and Israel abandoned by their followers. Given her proximity to – if not location in – Danite territory, Delilah may well provide us with one more example of tribal disloyalty. We might consider her a Hebrew if we wish; but nothing in her pedigree would reveal a motivation to doom Samson other than greed.

| **16**[1]Samson went down to Gaza. He saw there a prostitute and slept with her. [2]To the people of Gaza, it was said, 'Samson has come here'. They encircled him in ambush all night by the city gate, shushing each other all night by saying, 'Come daybreak, and we will kill him'. [3]Samson slumbered until midnight. Rising at midnight, he gripped the door panels of the city gate as well as the two doorposts. Tearing them loose with the shaft still in place, he set them on his shoulders and hauled them up towards the peak of the hill, the one facing Hebron.[5] | ¹ וַיֵּלֶךְ שִׁמְשׁוֹן עַזָּתָה וַיַּרְא־שָׁם אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ: ² לַעַזָּתִים לֵאמֹר בָּא שִׁמְשׁוֹן הֵנָּה וַיָּסֹבּוּ וַיֶּאֶרְבוּ־לוֹ כָל־הַלַּיְלָה בְּשַׁעַר הָעִיר וַיִּתְחָרְשׁוּ כָל־הַלַּיְלָה לֵאמֹר עַד־אוֹר הַבֹּקֶר וַהֲרַגְנֻהוּ: ³ וַיִּשְׁכַּב שִׁמְשׁוֹן עַד־חֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַיָּקָם בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַיֶּאֱחֹז בְּדַלְתוֹת שַׁעַר־הָעִיר וּבִשְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וַיִּסָּעֵם עִם־הַבְּרִיחַ וַיָּשֶׂם עַל־כְּתֵפָיו וַיַּעֲלֵם אֶל־רֹאשׁ הָהָר אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי חֶבְרוֹן: |

The Issue

By featuring a Samson who is alert to danger as well as highlighting Philistines who still hope to vanquish him by force of arm, this episode does contrast significantly from previous occurrences. Most glaring is the lack of obvious motivation for Samson's trek. While it is true that Samson will soon face his greatest challenge in Gaza, hard to fathom is why Samson would thread his way deeply into enemy territory just to sample carnally its local hookers. True too is that by moving to the antipodes of Philistine power, Samson (or God) has globalized his war against them. Still, aside from anticipating Samson's final days in Gaza, the incident seems neither to emerge from what had transpired nor to provide a fitting transition to what follows. In fact, no harm overtakes the overall architecture of the Samson cycle were it removed. Additionally, this narrator's relatively brief exploration of Samson's remarkable feat markedly contrasts with the expansive interest in events either around Timnah or in Delilah's boudoir. Striking in this instance, too, is Samson's bloodless confrontation with the Philistines when in previous (and ensuing) sequences, his opponents pay heavily at each conflict. Finally, in this encounter, there is no reference to

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5.   For the few grammatical and idiomatic oddities of the Hebrew text, see the annotations in my forthcoming Judges commentary. The two Greek renditions differ in minor ways from the Hebrew. They both (as well as Josephus) adopt a literal rendition of the euphemism *bō' 'el-* (a woman), by having Samson just stay there. They both also expand the ending to state that Samson sets the Gaza gates at the summit of a mountain facing Hebron, I suppose lest anyone imagine that he parked them only when he got to Delilah's gate.

any infusion of divine spirit (as at 14:6, 19; 15:4), when it at least equals previous displays of prowess. These observations lead to the following comments on the incident:

1. *Its Derivation*. Why among so many Samson exploits that test credulity, does the narrator invite disbelief by inserting this brief, yet gaudy, yarn? The answers in the literature are few. Most commentators simply ignore its distinction from the others, choosing to forge straight into the Delilah episode. Some propose that it is 'of the same character with the rest of the cycle, and doubtless of the same origin' (Moore 1895: 348). Others claim that it sharpens Samson's behavior as a clue in an allegory for Israel's compulsion to whore after foreign gods.[6] There is invariably the opinion that it comes from a different hand, period, school or the like.[7] Yet, if spliced into the series of Samson moves, the episode is by no means intrusive, as its language smoothly partakes from other components of the tales (Amit 1999: 283). To begin with, its opening phrase harks back to the moment Samson went to Timnah (see at 16:1). In setting this brief incident at Gaza, the narrator is also looking ahead to the cataclysm that will end Samson's life at the Gaza Temple. There is mention of ambushing Samson (forms of *'ārav*) here (16:2) and later (16:9, 12); of seizing (verb: *'āḥaz*) door panels (16:3) as well as Samson (at 16:21); and of pulling out (verb: *nāsaᶜ*) components of the gate at one heave (at 16:3) and those of a loom similarly (at 16:14).[8] None by itself suggests a clear linkage; but their occurrence in such a compact narrative is worthy of attention.

2. *Its Oddity*. Neither Samson's morals – he was a Nazir, so consecrated to God – nor his perplexing movements are as curious as the deed attributed to him on awakening in a whore's house. He knows that he is under watch;

6. Wong (2006: 231–6) follows others in championing this fragile linkage.

7. Opinions and criteria are many but are all equally speculative; see Brettler 2002: 54–6. Some take the mention of Gaza, its carnal focus and its (arguable) temporal unity as clues of its connection with the remaining events in ch. 16. Others locate it among the episodic elements of the previous chapters, due to an integral construction that defies clear-cut chronology. Still others consider it a stray that originally may not have belonged to Samson stories. Startling is Guillaume's (2004: 186–8) severely historicizing take that also plays on Sun mythology: the episode sharpens the failure of Neo-Babylonian rulers to take Egypt, leaving Gaza bereft of power, as does Samson, 'little sun', on removing its gate.

8. Amit (1999: 283–4) argues that without Samson's heroics at the Gaza gate, the Philistines might not have offered Delilah such a large sum to capture him. I would imagine that their earlier loss of thousands at his hand might have been enough incentive.

but rather than luring Philistines to a thrashing, he opts to deny them future protection by turning their city gateless, so defenseless: a deserved turn of events for cowardly soldiers who egged each other into postponing a confrontation with their nemesis (see at 16:2).

The Gates. Several cities of Levant had multiple fortifications: Nineveh and Babylon were each circled by at least two sets of formidably high walls. Movement in and out of a city occurred through several of their gates. Nineveh's fifteen gates (Reade 2016) punctured a wall that stretched out for about 7 miles (12 km). Babylon's wall was one and halftime as long (12 miles) and in the first millennium had nine gates. The wall around Jerusalem at the end of the monarchic period was likely a fraction of that circumference; in modern times, it is about 2.5 miles (4 km). The Bible mentions almost two dozen gates for Jerusalem, although the likelihood is that over time the same gate may have held several names.

The city gates of most fortified cities were not just gaps in massive walls; rather, at both ends of the breach (*petaḥ*, 'opening'), they included towers that could reach – as they did at Tell Dan – 25 feet (8 m) in height.[9] Gaza's fortifications await a full archaeological review; our knowledge of its gate system is scant. The Gaza besieged by Sargon (late eighth century) may have had two gates, leading to separate directions. If a scene on Assyrian reliefs proves to represent one of Gaza's gates, entry into the city was through a narrow opening, an arch topped by a horizontal lintel. Tall towers flanked the opening, each with its own battlement from which soldiers can shoot arrows.[10]

The Portals. Access into a town had to be wide enough to allow the attended entry of carts, chariots, and other vehicles. Minimally, they would be almost 7 feet (over 2 m) broad. The main gateway at Lachish was 16 feet (5 m) broad; most other gates of the area were likely around 10-12 feet wide. Height differed; but while those of Assyria can be exceptionally tall, those of Canaan and Israel seem to equal the width of the two leaves. A gate had a door (*delet*, most often plural *daltôt*), normally consisting of a pair of foot-thick, heavily nailed timber panels (likely pine, acacia and/

9. The literature on fortification and city gates is enormous. A good overview of gates and their functions in the Levant is in May 2014. To annotate this passage, I have found most useful the very fine dissertation by Frese (2012; especially ch. 4, 'The Gatehouse Entrance', 73–99), as well as the detailed lexical comments of Otto 2006. For Mesopotamia and Anatolia, there is a series of brief notices in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie,* 13: 86–96 (under 'Stadttor'). All three resources include exhaustive bibliographies.

10. Widely reproduced illustration, as in Frese 2012: 124.

or cypress). On their outer side, these panels were either sheathed with metal (most often bronze) or had several broad bands of the same. The process not only reinforced them, but also prevented (or at least slowed) torching by the enemy.[11] The panels were connected to massive doorposts (*mĕzûzâ*, most often plural *mĕzûzôt*) and rested on pivots (*'ammôt*) that were molded into a threshold of hard stone (*saf* and *miptān*, likely outer and inner sills). In allowing traffic, the panels swung to the inside of the gate. At night-time, the panels dovetailed shut into each other. One of several methods of locking them required sliding a beam or a metal bar (*bĕrîᵃḥ*) through brackets (metal usually) fastened to the inside face of the panels.

The Feat

The Heave. These details on Gaza's portal give us an inkling of Samson's herculean power. In one stroke, he was dealing with two panels (*daltôt*), two doorposts (*mĕzûzôt*), as well as the bar (*bĕrîᵃḥ*). In belonging neither to an ordinary home nor even to a compound, these elements made for a city gate of staggering width, length, girth and weight. Ordinarily, gates were shuttled on ox-pulled beds, given their weight and size; Samson's simply placed them on his shoulders (*vayyāśem ᶜal-kĕtēfāʸv*) to haul them away. This feat undoubtedly gave rise to a Talmudic notice about Samson enormous size: 'R. Simeon the Pious said: "The width between Samson's shoulders was sixty cubits (90 feet, 28 meters)"…and there is a tradition that the gates of Gaza were not less than sixty cubits [in width]' (*b. Sot.* 10a; *Num. Rab.* 14:9).[12]

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11. On making door panels, we have this letter from a Mari administrator (ARM 13 7; see Sasson 2017: 304–5): 'My lord wrote to me about the panel of cedar to produce for placement to match the panel at the Uṣur-pi-šarrim's Gate… I have measured comprehensively the pivot of the panel at the Uṣurpi-šarrim Gate: 2 reeds, 4 cubits, 8 fingers [just over 8 meters] is its entire span. The frame is 2 reeds and 10 fingers [about 7 meters]. For the size of this panel with its double casing of 2 cubits (1 meter) each, I am taking one veneer casing […]. My lord should know this.'

12. In other lore, Samson could take two mountains and knock them against each other, as might ordinary humans knock stones. When infused with divine spirit, he could traverse with a single step the distance between towns (*Lev. Rab.* 8:2). Similar hyperboles developed about Gilgamesh in the Hittite version: 'The great gods [created] Gilgamesh: His body was eleven yards [in height]; his breast was nine [spans] in breadth; his…was three […] in length'; G. Beckman in Foster 2001: 158. Whereas the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh was just larger than most of his

The Haul. How far Samson took these panels is debated. He did haul them away (*vayyaᶜǎlēm*) to the top of a specific mount (*hāhār*); but which hill was it? The Hebrew says *ᶜal-pĕnê*, a compound preposition that covers much ground: comparative – 'additional to', 'in preference over' (someone); spatial – 'opposite', 'over' something and the like. The targeted direction is Hebron, a town that will have its moment of glory by crowning David and hosting his first years of rule. The distance from Gaza to Hebron is about 37 miles (60 km); a bit farther is the hill that carries its name. Daunting must have been the climb necessary to reach that hill. Gaza's elevation is about 50 feet (so less than 15 m) above sea level; that of Hebron is close to 3,000 feet (900 m), with Mt Hebron over a thousand feet higher. Perhaps its mention implies 'Eastward', so away from the Mediterranean (Lagrange 1903: 243)? Whatever the favored interpretation, both Greek versions (as well as Josephus) felt the need to relieve Samson of his burden, adding 'and he set them down there'.

Given the syntax of the final clause, however, it is possible to argue that Samson took the gates to a nearby hill, one *that faced* distant Hebron. The highest point in the Gaza area is (Joz) Abu ᶜAwdah, a hillock 350 feet (100 m) above sea level. Slightly less elevated is Muntar, to the Southeast of the town, favored by some Christian fathers as Samson's climbing goal. This approach would be the prudent understanding of what Samson did with the gates; yet given the other circumstances of Samson's behavior in Gaza, turning pragmatic here would be missing the drift of the anecdote.

contemporaries (as were other kings such as Eannatum of Lagash), within centuries he acquired the oversized stature of gods; see George 2007: 247–8. Modern exegetes are not too far behind when comparing Samson to Hercules, Cuhullin and other mythical heroes. More modestly, Gunkel (1913: 40–1) labels him a *Naturmensch* who depends on his hands to crush lions and enemies; a marked contrast to the Philistines, who wield the products of culture to achieve their goals.

Samson also caught the imagination of artists as they set mosaic for their patrons. Earliest are diverse scenes in the Roman catacombs (early fourth century), with Samson battling a lion and striking Philistines with a jawbone (Gass and Zisu 2005: 169–72). Fullest is a series of nine scenes in a fifth-century synagogue (or church) in Mopsuestia (Misis) in Cilicia, with Samson larger than other humans (Avi-Yonah 1981). From about the same period, the Tell Huqoq (Galilee) synagogue preserves fragments of two, albeit non-contiguous, scenes: Samson deploys foxes and hauls away Gaza's gate (Grey and Magness 2013: 30). A scene with Samson striking Philistines with a jawbone decorated a Wadi Hammam synagogue. Leibner and Miller (2010: 256–7) report on several Samson scenes in Byzantine codices and in a tenth-century Armenian church (Achtamar, Lake Van in Turkey).

The Reception

I take it for granted that, however we might feel about the historical value of any episode in the Bible, its narrators and first hearers hardly doubted that the featured ancestors once fulfilled all actions assigned to them. Patriarchs, matriarchs, kings and heroes all met and surmounted extraordinary challenges. If such events featured divine protagonists, the more the necessity to suspend disbelief. This must certainly have been how the faithful absorbed the truths of Creation, the Flood and the Exodus. Occasionally, the defeat of Israel's enemies occurs through supernatural means – among them opportune earthquakes, celestial fires or rocks, powerful winds, sea parting and arrest of luminaries. How could these challenges to nature be doubted when Almighty God had full control over the cosmos? The same suspension of disbelief likely applied to interactions between humans and the divine, directly or through surrogates. Among such examples are Lot and his visitors in Sodom and Jacob and his wrestling bout with a man, both proving to come from the beyond. These occasions and interactions, albeit touched by the supernatural, must have occurred if only because Heaven orchestrated them.

Embellished Tales. The matter is more complicated when it comes to evaluating narratives of contacts among individuals of flesh and blood. Here, one needs to distinguish between an embellished tale and a 'Tall Tale'. The former features embroidered versions of the realistic (indeed, historical) and we meet with it whenever we come across bloated numbers of felled enemies or read about individuals wielding implausible weapons when decimating foes (Samson and Shamgar ben Anat in the book of Judges). The stories about Samson and his bouts with foes partook of these characteristics. The encounters he has had with a lion, foxes and diverse phalanxes of Philistines are all examples of heightened violence that might strain credulity (of some readers anyway); but there is nothing at the core of their plausibility that a dash of salt would not help to lend them verisimilitude. In hearing or reading about them, the discerning mind automatically trims them down to their proper balance, permitting focus on the intended lesson. For example, in terms of credibility (never mind historicity), the story of Moses's spies in Canaan (Num. 13:17-33) need not have been discounted because the men retrieved enormous grape clusters or saw gargantuan foes. The main points there were the promise as well as the challenge of conquering a very fruitful yet heavily defended Promised Land.

Tall Tales. It is otherwise with 'Tall Tales' in which the exaggerations are themselves the focus of the story, giving them a 'fictionality' that encourages transposal into other forms of comprehension, such as a parable or a paradigm. In such accounts, narrators tend to sharpen implausibility by multiplying clues, their main intent being to promote the didactic via the entertaining. In antiquity, any Samson reader acquainted with fortified cities would know that city gates, not least because of their size, bulk and weight, were not transportable on the back of any one individual, however mighty. For such gates were neither graspable by one pair of arms nor easily balanced on a human back. This is certainly the reason why the rabbis, acquainted though they were with divine miracles, converted Samson into a giant, his shoulders spanning dozens of cubits.

Samson might have negotiated the gate by climbing or vaulting over it, thus managing to escape Gaza just the same. Yet, by alluding to Hebron, the narrator made certain to generate doubt on the realism of this particular episode. Hebron, as noted above, is uphill from Gaza and miles away. A good bit of the territory in between was infested with Philistines who might have welcomed launching javelins and arrows on a gate-burdened Samson. This potential problem may well have inspired Pseudo-Philo into converting one panel of the gate into a shield.[13] More telling, however, is the reticence of the narrator to involve God in this particular exploit. Had we read that God's spirit landed on Samson as he faced the gates of Gaza, such a notice might certainly have thwarted most ancient readers from doubting the validity of the exploit.

I have made much of this observation less to question the historical value of this particular tale about Samson than to suggest that on occasion Scripture consciously indulged in assigning its heroes acts that skirted historical likelihood. In the first volume of my Judges commentary, I have had occasion to alert to another episode with fanciful writing pitting Othniel against Cushan-rishatayim (Judg. 3:7-11). My clue there was how a patently moralistic name ('Doubly Wicked Cushan') rhymed with the name of the land he ruled, Aram-naharayim. Not surprisingly, since Josephus, traditional and modern commentators on that passage have twisted our knowledge of the past into pretzels, not just to thread Cushan-rishatayim's move from Upper Syria deep into southern Canaan, but also to keep him in power there for almost a decade. Elsewhere in Scripture, narrators also use diverse tactics to alert perceptive readers

13. Pseudo-Philo could hardly allow the Philistines to escape unscathed; his Samson considers them 'fleas' and uses the gates on his back to kill 25,000 of them; *LAB* 43.2-4; following Harrington 1985: 356–7.

or audiences on the fictionality of what lies before them by assigning moralistic or whimsical names to characters that no parents would wish on their children. Such a tactic is obvious in Genesis 14 with its series of the named kings of Sodom (Bera, 'In Evil'), Gomorrah (Birsha, 'In Wickedness') and one of their allies (Bela, 'Swallower', likely king of Zoar).[14]

The Lesson

Our particular segment of Samson hardly demands historical validation; yet it urges us to consider the probability that, on a few occasions, biblical traditions did strive to convey instruction that offered sharper lessons than those derived from history. Neither the circumstance surrounding Samson's birth nor his Nazirite status was exceptional to Scripture. 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. This program opens on Samson seeking a bride among foreskinned Philistines, 'Now his father and mother had no idea that this was from the LORD, for he (Samson and/or God) was prodding a reaction from the Philistines'. It develops over a sequence of crucial clashes in which God manipulates Samson through measured infusion of divine spirit (*rûʷaḥ 'ĕlōhîm*) with which to bludgeon beasts and enemies.

14. Other schemes include (1) promoting non-existent rulers from periods otherwise scripturally well-documented, for example, Darius the Mede of Dan. 6:1; (2) formulating bogus titles, such as 'King of Nineveh' (Jon. 3:6), Nebuchadnezzar of Assyria (Jdt. 11), or Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 5:1-2); and (3) inventing non-existent locales, among them Bethulia (many variant spellings) in Jdt. 4:9 and Jeremiah's Merathaim ('double rebellion [possibly, Babylon]' Jer. 50:21). Complicated is how to evaluate the many moments in which narrators challenge their audience by referring to material found in archives, for example to the 'Book of Jashar' (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18), to the 'Book of Yʜᴠʜ wars' (Num. 21:14) or to several 'annals' (*divrēʸ hayyāmîm*) of departed rulers of Israel and/or Judah. Certainly beyond likelihood is the invitation to inspect the records of foreign kings, such as those of 'Persia and Media' (Est. 6:1; 10:2; see also Ezra 6:2).

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.[15] Samson is nonchalant about danger and can compete with the gods for brute strength, his portraiture hardly aiming for verisimilitude or credibility. In my reading of the second scene, with Delilah, Samson is danger-ously playful. Perversely misreading her intentions, he seeks repeatedly (and always unsuccessfully) to egg her on toward some erotic escapade by proposing successive realizations of ancient love charms in which binding, cutting, knotting and use of bodily elements such as sinews, hair, or nail clippings are essential ingredients.[16]

It is in the third setting that both aspects of Samson's character come together. In it, a blinded Samson gets set between pillars in a building, likely a Gaza temple for Dagon. Petitioning God for renewed strength, he brings it down over its myriad celebrants. An avenged Samson is among the many victims, thus losing none of his potential for shaping his own fate. Yet in doing so, he once again submits to being an instrument in the wider war that the God of Israel was waging. In Hebrew theosophy, that battle was non-ending. False though they may have been, these gods nonetheless remained pervasively (and perversely) dominant over their own worshipers. Worse, even as they experienced the might of their own god, Hebrews repeatedly turn to them without ever verifying their competence (Deut. 11:28; 13:3, 14 and elsewhere). As such moments, it was not enough for prophets to warn against foreign gods. Rather, false gods needed punishment directly, as was the case in many theomachies in which YHVH discomfited his many foes.[17]

15. The literature on this portrayal is large; but see Torrance 1978. I have commented on both the comic dupe and the comic hero in a study on Jonah; see Sasson 1990: 345–52.

16. I sustain, flesh out and defend these comments in my forthcoming *Anchor Yale Bible* commentary and, more succinctly, in a study of Judges 16 offered to a colleague.

17. Theomachy, the confrontation between and among gods, is a major component of cosmological mythmaking in antiquity. In its best-known variety, individual gods rise by supplanting others either violently or peacefully. In the process, successful deities confer primacy on their chosen people or city. This version of the combat is heavily featured in the Hebrew Bible (lastly, Miller 2018) and elsewhere (Heimpel 1997: 549, 561–2; Beckman 1997: 569–70). Since the nineteenth century, yet with

However, there were other manifestations of theomachy. In them, humans were facilitators or instruments in divine apotheoses. In the Hebrew Bible, a parade example is when Moses discomfits Pharaoh, hence also the gods of Egypt, or Elijah exterminates Baal priests, proving the impotence of their god (1 Kgs 18:20-46). Less directly, when aboard a storm-tossed ship, Jonah proves God's superiority over Sea (Jon. 1). Samson's final moments in Gaza belong to a variation of this trope, wherein the human instrument dies in the process. The fullest example of this manifestation from antiquity occurs in two variants of the Anatolian myth 'Illuyanka' (see Hoffner 1998: 10–14; Beckman 1982). Both feature a Storm God (Taru) conniving to regain power from Illuyanka (a serpent) that had defeated him. In one version, his daughter, (the goddess Inara) marries a mortal (Hupasiya) who trusses a drunken Illuyanka before the Storm God kills him. In the second and more relevant version, the son of the Storm God betrays Illuyanka into surrendering a powerful asset, and loses his own life as a result.

Little in this Anatolian tale matches what we find in the Samson account save for its outcome. Here, God is triumphant, Dagon is defeated (not for the last time, see 1 Sam. 5) and Samson perishes as a result. Both parties get to play a role in the Philistine debacle: 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.

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elusive success, Samson has been portrayed as an avatar of alpha deities (from Mesopotamian Ninurta and Shamash to Greek Heracles) or of epic heroes (from Gilgamesh to Cúchulainn). There are overviews of these efforts in works from Palmer 1913 to Mobley 2006. A less direct application of the theme considers Samson tales as 'folklorization of mythological compositions aiming at emptying them of their power' (Guillaume 2004: 191).

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