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Samson as Riddle

Jack M. Sasson

A generation ago, in 1981, in fact, Ed Greenstein wrote a luminous study on "The Riddle of Samson."[1] Among the many insights he delivered there is that any folktale from antiquity carries multiple meanings and so opens to multiple interpretations. Ed chose to treat the full Samson story as "riddle-like," finding explanations for seeming incongruities, among them the hero's conception, naming, character, and seeming disregard of some Nazir restrictions. Additionally, Ed speculated on Samson's detachment from his roots and on his selfish battles. For him, the riddle of Samson is resolved by treating his exploits as an allegory of Israel's saga.[2]

In a paper I affectionately dedicate to honor Ed as well as to fete our lasting friendship, I should admit at the outset that I cannot not match his daring and virtuosity. Rather, I will focus on the famous banquet episode to entertain a perplexing turn of events in Judg 14–15: Why did Samson accept the solution offered by the Philistines when in fact it leaked like goulash in a sieve?

The Background

The full background to the circumstances is surely too familiar to our Jubilar for me to flesh out the particulars to this conundrum. In ancient

1. *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 237–60. I gratefully acknowledge fine suggestions by colleagues Jennifer Williams (Linfield College) and Fook-Kong Wong (Hong Kong Theological Seminary).

2. Ed's interpretation is welcomed by many scholars, among them Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 231–36; and me in "Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)." *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 339 n. 2.

administrative and diplomatic archives, banquets are occasions for displaying wealth, honoring guests, and forging alliances. In literary texts, however, the occasion is also a setting for the reversal of fortunes (murders are frequent then) as well as the launching of challenges through verbal jousting.[3] The last come in a broad variety and include the Sumerian *adamanduga* (debate on superiority, with nonhuman antagonists), Greek *skolia,* Arabic *naqā'id* (lampoons, often between tribes or clans), Norse and Celtic *flyting* (provocation), Baroque-era *emblem riddles*, and the like. Ironically enough, the normal outcome for such occasions is the forging of bonds between newcomers and their hosts.[4]

In the tale of Samson, however, events went out of control, ending in the alienation of the main guest. Eventually they also launched murderous sprees that took the lives of many, including that of the ostensibly prized bride-to-be. Of course, this consequence may have had to do with the protagonist's personality, but more likely it was fated to happen because his God (as per 14:4) was prodding reactions from the Philistines (כי־תאנה הוא־מבקש מפלשתים), Israel's enemies at that moment. The question I raise is whether Samson was a tool or an accomplice to such results.

3. For an archival illustration of how banqueting and diplomacy worked, see Jack M. Sasson, "The King's Table: Food and Fealty in Old Babylonian Mari," in *Food and Identity in the Ancient World*, ed. Christiano Grottanelli and Lucio Milano (Padua: S.A.R.G.O.N., 2004), 179–215. In ancient lore, banquets serve to focus on a critical juncture of a story, as when gods banquet at the crowning of Marduk in Enuma Elish (Babylon) or when they guarantee descendants for King Kirta (Ugarit). They serve to bracket major moments in an unfolding drama, as in the biblical Esther and the demotic tales of Setne Khamwas. In many lore, they offer an ironic setting for violent acts against guests, as in the murder of Amnon (2 Sam 13:28–30) and in the proscription of Haman. In addition, banquets can be veritable storehouse of motifs: crowning or dethroning kings, clothing or denuding guests, wining for losing friends, inebriating foes, challenging enemies, empowering kin, and altering the status of individuals. On all this, see Christiano Grottanelli, "The Roles of the Guest in the Epic Banquet," in *Production and Consumption in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Carlo Zaccagnini (Budapest: Egyptology Department of the University, 1989), 272–332.

4. Jean-Jacques Glassner, "L'hospitalité en Mésopotamie ancienne: Aspect de la question de 1'étranger," *ZA* 80 (1990): 60–75. A nice collection of essays is in Rika Gyselen, ed., *Banquets d'Orient*, ResOr 4 (Leuven: Peeters, 1992).

The Setting

As Samson and his parents make their way to cement marriage with a Philistine, Samson is sidetracked (we know not how or why) into a confrontation with a כפיר אריות, a raging lion, but hardly fully mature. The animal is slain, and its corpse becomes host to a swarm of bees and the source of honey that later (not clear how long) feeds Samson and his (clueless) parents. Details and timing are important to that transaction, but I skip over them, as the main interest here is how these circumstances play in the confrontation launched at the nuptial banquet.[5] Crucial to keep in mind, however, is the extraordinary series of circumstances, for which Samson is the sole protagonist as well as the lone witness.

Samson funds a banquet for thirty of his Philistine peers in Timnah, perhaps at its central townhouse rather than at the bride's home. There, amid the banter that breaks out at most such occasions, Samson challenges them to solve a חִידָה, conveniently "a riddle," for which he proposes a lopsided wager: Each of them could lose one set of clothing for the thirty he would need to furnish should they succeed.[6]

The Riddle

Riddles come in too many formats to neatly catalogue, but they involve two parties and are couched in potentially multiple segments, with descriptions for objects that hearers must supply, leaving them

5. Plenty of relevant comments are in my forthcoming Anchor Yale Bible commentary *Judges 13–21* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

6. The Greek translations render "riddle" by αἴνιγμα "obscure image," διήγημα "discourse," and πρόβλημα "conundrum," thus suggesting a similar semantic range. The etymology of חידה is itself a riddle. The word occurs over a dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, of which eight occur in our story. When paired, חידה balances with מׇשׇל, a word that has a broad range of meanings, including "proverb," "parable," "fable," even "taunt." חידה is controlled by a cognate verb חוד "to pose" but occasionally also by נסה* (*piel*) "to test" (1 Kgs 10:1; Hab 2:6) and *נבע (*hiphil*) "to pour out" (Ps 78:2).

Searching for a Semitic cognate has not been successful. The closest match is to Akkadian (Amorite) *ḫîd*/*ṭum* occurring in a Mari divinatory context (A.747), for which see Jack M. Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters* (University Park, PA.: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 256. There a *ḫayyatum* interprets a divine message. This phrasing brings us close to Num 12:8, where God displays himself to Moses directly, speaking to him in plain language (ולא בחידת).

to decide on any connected sense. In any phrase, the statement may depend on double meanings of words or on esoteric language in the formulation, such that few have a path to a solution. Most commonly, one side proposes one or several (cryptic) lines for which the other side offers a solution that resolves or harmonizes the premises.[7] Despite the broad possibilities inherent to the genre, the riddles that we shall meet in this segment pose special issues in their construction, reaction, indeed even setting.

Samson's riddle (14:14), "From the eater out came the eaten; from the powerful out came the sweet" (מהאכל יצא מאכל ומעז יצא מתוק), is brief, with just six words allocated to two phrases.[8] Each of the two phrases has just three words, with a shared core verb, יצא "to come out." That verb is in the past, but time may be material or not, depending on the solution. Alliteration constructs artificially by opening on the sound *m*.[9] The first segment plays on two references to the verb אכל "to eat," with the first, האכל, a participle referring to the subject, "the eater," and the second מאכל a noun referring to something eaten. What Samson had in mind notwithstanding, this particular segment might not seem particularly fiendish to solve, especially if the guests took the verb יצא broadly, for it might occur to them that animals feed and get eaten.

The solution to the other clause may give more trouble. עז "strong" is an adjective, often defining a tyrant (Isa 19:4), a merciless enemy (Ps 18:18), a cruel owner, but also a person strengthened by wisdom (Prov 24:5). It might also connote powerful forces of nature (sea and wind). מתוק "sweet" contrasts with "bitter" (מר, Isa 5:20), evoking the sweetness of honey (Ps 19:11). It also serves metaphors for lovemaking (Song 2:3), untroubled sleep (Qoh 5:11), and divine instruction (Ezek 3:3). Because of the diversity of applications, therefore, the mind might find it harder to offer a plausible key. As we shall see, when the Philistines do offer a solution to the riddle, their explanation will arguably pertain only to this particular leg of the puzzle (at 14:18).

7. Less often, the reverse also occurs: an answer (or more) is first offered for which a question has to be reconstructed (think of *Jeopardy*, the American TV game show).

8. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

9. James A. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 11–12; Claudia V. Camp and Carol R. Fontaine, "The Words of the Wise and Their Riddles," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Bernard C. Latigan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 138–40.

Their "Solution"

The Philistines fretted over the riddle for several days without arriving at a plausible answer.[10] What they did offer (at 14:18) is unusual in adopting the interrogative format of Samson's riddle, as if to throw the dare back at him: "What is sweeter that honey, and what is stronger than a lion?" (מה־מתוק מדבש ומה עז מארי). It echoes the components and the number of the words in the riddle but reverses the sequence of the queries. It consists of two clauses that mimic the structure of Samson's phrases, even expanding on its alliteration on the sound *m* (see above). Each has three words, the first of which is the interrogative pronoun מַה/מֶּה. In couching the phrases as questions, the narrator may be affirming that, from the perspective of the Philistines, "turnabout is fair play." The language they use, as noted above, replays just the *second* segment of Samson's riddle, in that they succeed to collate מתוק "sweet" with דבש "honey" and עז "strong" with ארי "lion." In fact, they have left unresolved the connection between the words in the first leg of the riddle, pertaining to the eaten coming out from the eater.

The Capitulation

Samson could have demanded from the Philistines explanations that are more concrete. After all, their confection could apply to many answers that are more appropriate to nuptial merriments, not least among them love, death, and knowledge. Quick to respond to obvious betrayal, Samson (seemingly) "throws in the towel," using the precise verb מצא "to solve" in terming their success. His response, however, is not to attack them so much as to rage against the woman, his betrayer. "Had you not ploughed

10. In his magisterial commentary, George Foot Moore (*Judges*, ICC [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895], 337) emends שלשת ("three") into ששת ("six") days, apparently to dovetail into what is said in the next verse. Daunting is the problem for explaining the cited seven days (at 14:17) as an interval before Samson spilled the beans to his prospective wife (proposals in my forthcoming commentary). This duration is an obvious challenge to what we learn at 14:15: the Philistines apparently did not terrorize her until the seventh and last day of the feast. Proposed are many emendations or excisions, among them most drastically is Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Le livre des Juges*, EBib (Paris: Lecoffre, 1903), 236. He omits all references to the number of days. Frankly, it may be best to decide that the narrator has artlessly charted the limits of Samson's capacity to endure the harangues of a panicked woman.

with my heifer, you could not have solved my riddle" (לולא חרשתם בעגלתי לא מצאתם חידתי), he exclaims. Again, we meet with a statement made up of two clauses, and again with the same number of words, with both segments controlled by the particle לולא, "had you not…." In the first clause, he labels the woman עגלתי "my heifer," taking possession of her even as he means to excoriate her.

Samson's choice of noun has a double purpose, one of which is to deliver an aural play on חידתי "my riddle" of the succeeding clause. The other means to carry a bite. Hebrew nomenclature for women calls on plants (such as Hadassah, Shoshanna, Tamar) as well as animals (such as Rachel, Zipporah, Deborah, Jael, Jemima).[11] It would therefore not be surprising to name a nice and plump (basic meaning of the root) baby girl Leah ("cow") or Eglah ("heifer"; a wife of David). It is another matter, however, to apply it to a nubile woman, especially when evoking Samson's language and intent.

The verb חרשׁ covers several semantic ranges, including "to plow, to cut deeply (hence to inscribe)" but also to "devise, to plot (often negatively), to craft." It may be that these two areas of meanings once had roots with differing Proto-Semitic consonants, but their blending in Hebrew permitted puns, such as in Hos 10:13, addressing Israel, "You have plowed/plotted wickedness; you have harvested iniquity." Samson's allusion nicely plays on the potentially obscene application of ב חרשׁ- that goes beyond the normal attested meaning of "to plow by means of oxen" (Deut 22:10; Amos 6:12). To "plough into" would be the coarser version, implying sexual congress.[12]

Assessments

Samson's riddle and the solution the Philistines offered have occupied the attention of commentators, past and present. Both of its phrases provide

11. Johann Jakob Stamm, "Hebräische Frauennamen," in *Hebräische Wortforschung: Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Walter Baumgartner*, VTSup 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1967, 328–30).

12. One of the Greek versions (Rahlfs A) seems to recognize this potential, as it gives, "had you not subdued [κατεδαμάσατέ] my heifer." The inflection occurs also in the Jerusalem Talmud; see Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man; The Story of Samson (Judges 13–16)*, Bible in History 7 (Bern: Lang 2006), 260. Abarbanel and Gersonides openly suggest as much: Samson is accusing them of having consorted with her (whether for her pleasure or abuse).

contrasts: eater and eaten; strong and sweet (not quite opposites). They also establish *linkage* (eater secretes the eaten; the strong secretes the sweet). The *contrasts* are potentially deducible by any clever puzzler. The *linkage*, however, depends on an incident (lion and bees) beyond the knowledge of anyone but Samson. As offered by the Philistine, the solution nicely focused on the *contrastive* elements. Did Samson's angry reaction imply that in their answer the Philistines attended to their *linkage*? There is a rich literature, fortunately somewhat repetitive, on all these matters.[13] I sample two interpretive avenues, one focusing on the possible inspiration for the riddle, the other on the setting for its delivery.

Inspiration

A good number of analysts disdain offering an elaborate explanation for a riddle that they deem beyond intuitive elucidation. Moore has this to say, "a very bad riddle, and quite insoluble without a knowledge of the accidental circumstance which suggested it."[14] Others give up on an internal solution altogether. Edgar Slotkin's opinion is that, in any case, "most riddles are designed not to be solved."[15] Other commentators, however, seek explanations beyond the Samson tales. For Cooke, the riddle emerged from an observable natural phenomenon: when the sun stands in the sign of Leo (mostly May–June), bees in Palestine produce their honey.[16] The nar-

13. The literature on the topic is enormous; but it can be sampled in any good commentary or encyclopedic entry (for online suggestions, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samson%27s_riddle). The following are bibliographically helpful: Hans Bauer, "Zu Samsons Ratsel in Richter Kapita 14," *ZDMG* 66 (1912): 473–74; Azzan Yadin, "Samson's *ḥîdâ*," *VT* 52 (2002): 407–26; Erik Eynikel, "The Riddle of Samson: Judges 14," in *Stimulation from Leiden: Collected Communications to the XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Leiden 2004*, ed. Hermann Michael Niemann and Matthias Augustin (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2006), 45–54.

14. Moore, *Judges*, 335.

15. Edgar Slotkin, "Response to Professors Fontaine and Camp," in Latigan, *Text and Tradition*, 155. I cannot follow those who place our example among "neck-riddles." This particular type features riddles solved by characters who would forfeit their lives on a false answer (think of Oedipus and Prince Calaf of Turandot); discussion in Mira Morgenstern, "Samson and the Politics of Riddling," *Hebraic Political Studies* 1 (2006): 267–68; Yadin, "Samson's *ḥîdâ*," 408–9.

16. George A. Cooke, *The Book of Judges in the Revised Version*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 141.

rator shaped an incident from the observation, the application of which (incomprehensibly) eluded the Philistines, although they shared the same environment. Bauer locates a clever pun in the solution of the Philistines: Allegedly, ארי, "lion," is also a word in Arabic for "honey," so matching דבש of the first clause.[17] Many commentators espouse this notion but scarcely chart the word's trajectory into Hebrew or clarify how it solves any aspects of the riddle.[18]

Likewise for the Philistines' response: some scholars look for solutions independent of Samson's riddle and therefore also of lion kills and honey-rich carcasses. Narrators supposedly linked two independent gnomic declarations, with only a set of target answers they share, among them "venom," "semen," "love," just plain sex, "death," and "knowledge."[19]

Setting

For many commentators, the main issue is not so much deciphering the riddle as recognizing the background or nature of the context in which Samson proposed it. Margalith has explored potential "parallels" between the Samson and Greek narratives, especially regarding bees in carcasses.[20] Yadin expands by linking Greek and Timnah marriage ceremonies based on components (journey to bride's home and banqueting

17. I have failed to confirm this attestation in Arabic dictionaries. Lothar Kopf ("أري = Honey?" *Tarbiz* 23 [1952]: 240–42) thinks it is a product of exegetical elaboration (citation courtesy Gary Rendsburg).

18. Among them are Stanislav Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII–XVI," *VT* 34 (1984): 454–61; and Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 269 n. 57.

19. "Venom" (Harry Torczyner, "The Riddle in the Bible," *HUCA* 1 [1924]: 125), "semen" (Hans-Peter Müller, "Der Begriff 'Rätsel' im Alten Testament," *VT* 20 [1970]: 468–69), "love" (many, among them Philip Nel, "The Riddle of Samson," *Bib* [1985]: 242–43). Piquant are proposals to link Samson's riddle with intimation of oral sex (in either direction, depending on actor); see Camp and Fontaine, "Words of the Wise," 141–42. John Pairman Brown is more sinister, offering "vagina dentata" as explanation (*Israel and Hellas*, BZAW 231 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995], 228–29). Less anatomical is a similar exposition by James L. Crenshaw, "Impossible Questions, Sayings, and Tasks," *Semeia* 17 (1980): 20–23.

20. In his *Georgics* (4.281–314), Vergil speaks of bees autogenetically rising from the cadaver of bulls. Herodotus (*Hist*. 5.114) tells of a hive formed in a suspended skull. Othniel Margalith ("Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks," *VT* 36 [1986]: 225–29) cites these anecdotes to claim Late Bronze Aegean cultural inspiration for

there before consummation) that, in fact, occur for centuries in Semitic cultures. Claiming a Mycenaean cultural affinity for the Philistines that continues into Greek culture (both dubious conjectures), Yadin proposes that, rather than riddles and solutions, the give and take between Samson and his guests represents examples of "the *skolion* or capping song in which a symposiast would recite a verse, challenging his fellow drinkers to 'cap' it."[21] This particular *skolion* would be treading on a culturally shared observation (in this case, honey in carcasses), while its "cap" would require the Philistines to offer an aphorism, fable, or the like, so as to rehearse a motive embedded in the *skolion* (in this case love or desire). All this is clever, yet Yadin is too cavalier when bridging historical no less than cultural gaps among Mycenaeans, Greeks, Philistines, and Danites. We might also wonder why a capper would need to threaten the Timnah woman if arriving at an acceptable answer needed only clever manipulations of Samson's words rather than specific knowledge of what he had in mind.

Locating independent origins or settings for Samson's riddle may relieve us from elucidating a plot that relies on privileged knowledge of events; however, if we are to remain within the purview of the tale at hand (as we should), we are nonetheless obliged to explain why the Philistines' solution satisfied Samson enough to storm out of the banquet. For this, let me go back to the scene with Samson in his bride-to-be's boudoir.

What Samson Revealed

> Do not open your heart to your dear wife. If she presses you hard, seal away the presents in your sealed storage room. Do not let your wife get to know the very inside of your purse. (Mesopotamian wisdom)
>
> Do not reveal your thought to a woman you love. Seal [it up], however much she cuddles (?) or attacks you. (Instructions of Shupe-Ameli, Ugarit)
>
> Do not open your heart to your wife; what you have said to her goes to the street. (Egyptian wisdom)[22]

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a Philistine setting of Samson's riddle. I do not think it is reasonable to retroject a Roman adaptation of a Greek anecdote into the Mycenaean past.

21. Yadin, "Samson's *ḥîdâ*," 419.

22. Mesopotamia: Martin Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 688; Ugarit: adapted from Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses. An*

In the banquet days following his wager, Samson remains confident that Philistines would not solve a riddle constructed on a very isolated event. As noted above, the chronology of events is not easily decipherable.[23] Nonetheless, the narrator gives Samson and the Timnah woman privacy even when not all the stages of the marriage process were yet final. Panicking now because of Philistine threats, she goes full throttle. ותבך עליו (14:17) implies breaking into loud and constant weeping. Elsewhere the idiom often has "neck" or "face" as indirect object, literally or implicitly evoking the intimate posture she took. If we strive for the dramatic, we might imagine the woman clutching at Samson as she tearfully launches her accusations.

For almost the entire duration of their courting, Samson resists the woman's harassment—"for she badgered him" (כי הציקתהו) (14:17)—insisting that even his own parents had no knowledge of the proper answer. In real life as well as in literature from antiquity, women experienced conflict in transferring allegiance from parents to husbands.[24] As the bank of citations offered above suggests, folk wisdom had alerted Samson not to share his secret with a bride, let alone one raised by his people's oppressors. He was therefore not likely to buy her line about love when ancient cultures warned against trusting wives too soon, certainly before they shifted loyalty to children. However, Samson does give in.

The text says, "So it was that on the seventh day he revealed it to her" (ויהי ביום השביעי ויגד־לה).[25] The question that does come to mind is: What did Samson reveal? Later on, Samson will invoke multiple false answers

Anthology of Akkadian Literature, 3rd ed. (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005), 418; Egypt: *AEL* 3:169. Commenting on the Timnah banquet debacle, Josephus (*A.J.* 5.294) writes, "Nothing is more deceitful than a woman who betrays our speech to you."

23. Ibn Ezra conjectures that, out of personal curiosity, the woman had been whining since Samson proposed the riddle. The rabbis (Rashi among them) blithely proposed that she had begun weeping only since the Sabbath, allegedly when her compatriots threatened violence.

24. For living examples, see my comments on political and dynastic marriages in Mari in Sasson, *From the Mari Archives*, 110–18, 215 n. 2. The Hebrew Bible exploits the unusual theme of wives siding with husbands rather than fathers, such as the cases of Rachel and Leah against Laban (Gen 31) and Michal against Saul (1 Sam 19).

25. Likely feeling awkward about the matter, Josephus (*A.J.* 5.292–293) has him as telling it all: "he revealed the story of the slaying of the lion and how he had carried off the three honeycombs sprung from its carcass and brought them to her. Suspecting no fraud he recounted all, but she betrayed his story to her questioners."

to keep his secret from Delilah, a woman whom he actually loved (16:4, ויאהב) rather than merely desired (at 14:3, כי־היא ישׁרה בעיני). Consequently, it might be reasonable to conjecture that what the Timnah woman heard from Samson at his one and only admission is what she relayed to the Philistines. In turn, what Samson heard from them is more or less the phrase that he placed in her mouth. I imagine him telling the woman that "the eater" and "the strong" have to do with the same animal: a lion. As well, she learned from him that "the eaten" and "the sweet" were the same: honey. These two explanations were exactly what the Philistines gave back to Samson, albeit in more elegant language: "What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?"

Coached by the woman (and thanks to Samson's guidance), the Philistines may feel brilliant at deciphering the *contrastive* elements of his riddle. However, they remain clueless (and for good reason) about recovering the *linkage* behind its two segments. Spotting their failure, Samson could have easily declared himself a winner because their solution was by no means complete.

The Greater Goal

Yet Samson did not. He recognized in the Philistines' clever answer the vocabulary he had divulged to the woman and thus knew that they fell for his ruse. They might well have imagined success, but Samson was already leaping toward grander results. In his own response, Samson acted the betrayed and stormed out in anger. Left forlorn, the woman and her father imagine a deep rupture in the marriage process. In arranging for another person to marry her, the family gave Samson further reasons to act deceived. In fact, the trap Samson had set worked, giving Samson the perfect opportunity to proceed with God's plan. Despoiling the Philistines for the garments with which to fulfill his pledge was just the first opportunity to do so. The Philistines themselves soon realized that what they spouted to him was not good enough. Granting him justification for his violent outrage (at 15:6), they ended up fulfilling their threat against the woman and her kin and so offered Samson more occasions by which to pummel them.[26]

26. Soon (at 16:1–3), he will render defenseless one of their prime cities (Gaza) by hauling away its gates.

If we do follow this line of reasoning, we may need to confront a Samson who is much more calculating than the literature has for him.[27] Despite the narrator's dazzling control of verisimilitude in this episode, we are obviously not dealing with the transcript of events but with transmitted lore that strove to achieve a transcendent or inspirational account of inherited traditions. In my scenario, rather than merely reacting to events beyond his own control, Samson actively shaped them to advance a grander goal. In consequence, far from being a Grand Guignol puppet, Samson was *knowingly* teaming with God in the manufacture of excuses to battle the Philistines. On two occasions subsequent to the Philistines' false triumph (14:19; 15:14), God actively promoted Samson's victory over his enemies. This collaboration, in fact, will not reach its most intense fulfilment until the Hebrew God takes control of the conflict, staging a theomachy to humiliate Dagon in his own Gaza temple.[28] It will be neither the first nor the last of God's many battles against the false gods to which Israel foolishly grants power. The riddle that remains in the Samson story

27. See also Arthur Quinn, "The Riddles of Samson: A Rhetorical Interpretation of Judges 14–16," *Pacific Coast Philology* 18 (1983): 84–91; Yairah Amit, *Shoftim: ʿim mavo u-ferush*, Mikra le-Yisra'el (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999), 234. Pseudo-Philo (LAB 43.1) makes short shrift of the entire Timnah episode. Nevertheless, he features a calculating Samson: "When Samson had begun to grow up and sought to fight against the Philistines, he took for himself a wife from the Philistines. The Philistines burned her in the fire, because they had been badly humiliated by Samson" (see http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/bap/bap58.htm).

28. It would hardly be the first occasion in which, to advance a good cause, God moves a protagonist to deceit; see at 1 Sam 16:1–5. An illustrative conjunction among warring divinities, human instruments, and marriages are the two versions of the Hittite (actually Hattian) lluyanka tale. Both feature a storm god (Taru) conniving to regain power from Illuyanka (a serpent) that had defeated him. The second version is the more paradigmatic of the two: upon losing his heart and eyes to the serpent, the storm god sires a son who, on marrying the daughter of his enemy, demands the heart and eyes as marriage gift, handing them to his father. Complete once again, the god defeats Iluyanka. On feeling remorseful for his betrayal, the son invites (and gets) his own death. For this version, see Harry A. Hoffner Jr., *Hittite Myths*, 2nd ed., WAW 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 13.

Of relevance here is the way gods use humans to achieve their goals: the use of marriage as subterfuge and the death of the individual after fulfilling his function. While it hardly matches the wealth of features in the Samson narrative, this version does suggest an interesting variation on theomachy that may well obtain in the ancient world.

is how and why, in yet another boudoir, a judge of Israel sensed the time to end his own mission on earth.[29] The relevant explanation, however, is for another occasion.[30]

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29. See for now "Of Shekels and Shackles: A Wadi Sorek Romance (Judges 16)," in *The Woman in the Pith Helmet: A Tribute to Archaeologist Norma Franklin*, ed. Jennie Ebeling and Philippe Guillaume (Atlanta: Lockwood, 2020), 263–77. Perceived from this angle, I am not surprised that Christian fathers (and John Milton in *Samson Agonistes*) saw in Samson a prototype for Christ. Yet again, practically every worthy Hebrew Bible male character was similarly christologized.

30. I explore this issue in "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), 176–89.

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