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## OF SHEKELS AND SHACKLES: A WADI SOREK ROMANCE (JUDGES 16)

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*Abstract: This essay focuses on Samson in Delilah's chamber (Judges 16). It explores the use of love charms in antiquity to clarify the bonds between the two major characters. It also offers an alternative understanding for why Samson gave in to Delilah's serial insistence that he reveals the secret of his strength.*

Keywords: Samson, Delilah, Judges 13–16

*Amare et sapere vix deo conceditur*  
(Publilius Syrus, first century BCE)

To Norma Franklin, a good friend for a generation and a respected colleague for twice as long, I offer frothy thoughts about Samson's final moments as a free human being. A first-rate archaeologist with scrupulous attachment to historical facts and realities, Norma is also a lover of good stories. On this occasion, therefore, I avoid commenting on the origin(s), date(s), and permutations of traditions on which hard-core scholarship grooves.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I will trust the Hebrew editor to have redacted a version that, however episodic, has proven its power to please through countless reformulations, in poetry, art, musical settings, and films.

No one, Norma least of all, needs reminding of the essentials of the Samson stories that unfold from Judges 13 through 16. Having given up on raising a family, a childless couple from the tribe of Dan receives divine news that they are to have a son. Repeated threefold in the span of chapter 13 (at 3–5, 7, and 13–14), extraordinary instruction consistently assigns the wife (conspicuously unnamed) the burden of consecrating her body, perhaps for the duration of her pregnancy. She is to abstain from intoxicants and unclean food. The child is to be a Nazir, his hair remaining unshorn throughout his life, for "he will begin to rescue Israel from Philistine control" (13:5).

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1. I explore these issues (and more) in my forthcoming *Judges 13–21* (Anchor Yale Bible). Most any decent Judges commentary will review issues on these matters.

So much for how Samson's story begins. The scene that will interest at chapter 16 features Samson, Delilah, the Philistines, and God. Here is a thumbnail review of their attributes.

## The Protagonists

### *Samson*

When we first meet Samson, he is of uncertain age, but old enough to wish for marriage. He has a taste for forbidden fruit, intending to marry from among his people's oppressors. From his rejection of parental advice, we surmise also that he is headstrong. From that incident, too, we learn that he is an instrument in games God periodically plays against his people's adversaries as well as against their gods (14:1–5). When suffused with divine power, Samson can kill a (young) lion barehanded (14:5–7), savage a bunch of Philistines (14:17–19), and batter hundreds of their armed men (15:14–17). Even when left to his own mettle, he can unleash scarcely believable prowess to leave a fortified city defenseless (16:1–3). Samson can be devious in seeking to best his adversaries (14:12–18), righteous in seeking revenge (15:1–3), and inventive when doing so (15:4–8). Yet, he could be protective of his kin (15:9–15) and cognizant of the source of his strength (15:18–19). When we are about to feature him in a drama set in a bedroom, Samson had already displayed a carnal appetite by visiting a whore in Gaza (16:1–3).

### *Delilah*

Delilah is unheralded when she comes on stage and, if we ignore the postbiblical enhancements of her single appearance, she will fade into the twilight when she leaves it.<sup>2</sup> She is, however, the unique woman in the Samson tales to have a name, albeit scarcely transparent in meaning.<sup>3</sup> She lives in Wadi Sorek (*naḥal sōrēq*), named for its vineyards, a porous demarcation between Hebrew and Philistine lands, so likely inhabited by

2. Delightful tidbits about Delilah's portraits in literature and art are in Gunn 2005: 211–20. In the movies and elsewhere, she perishes with Samson's destruction of the Gaza temple. More inventive is the late haggadic lore by the fabulist Eldad ha-Dani (ninth–tenth century). There, Samson and Delilah had children and lived in the land of Havilah ("Where the gold is," Gen 2:11); see Neubauer 1889: 105; and note 4 below. Scholars needlessly attach her to the mother of Micah of chapter 17.

3. The name's construction (*qātil*, denoting a condition, with a feminine ending), certainly looks Semitic if not Hebraic. Several Hebraic words build on the root \**dll*, having to do with "poverty," "scarcity," but also with dangling (a baby?) hair. Akkadian offers several constructions based on *dalālum*, "to praise," among them the name Dalal-Ishtar, a devotee of a (love) deity. The rabbis, however, gave us all a chance to derive moral lessons: "Rabbi says: 'Even if her name had not been Delilah, she deserved to be called by such a name: She enfeebled (*dıldēla*) his strength, she enfeebled his actions, she enfeebled his determination'" (Midrash *Numbers Rabbah* 9:24).

elements from both communities. Consequently, there is debate about her ethnicity. She is widely presumed to be Philistine because the adult Samson seems drawn to its women, for marriage or dalliance. She might be a Hebrew, but given her trade and her fondness for its income, her ethnicity may be irrelevant. Strikingly, Delilah is linked to no parents, husband, or sons, so is independent of male protection, a much more prevalent status for women than is realized in scholarly literature. In Rabbinic literature, however, she is Samson's wife (*MNazar* 2), presumably to sharpen her betrayal as well as to warn of alliances with foreign women.<sup>4</sup>

In the Hebrew account, Delilah does not earn the label *zōnā* as did the whore of Gaza or, earlier in Judges, Jephthah's mother (11:1). Nonetheless, Delilah is often cited as a prostitute, in ancient literature a label (Greek: πόρνη) attached to women who ply their trade in brothels, streets, or open space, as did Enkidu's guide to civilization (*Gilgamesh Epic*) or the pseudo-prostitute Tamar (*Gen 38*). However, Delilah connects with rulers and commands tons of cash. Her home is large enough to hide ambushers and to accommodate admirers for longer stretches than might the hovel of a hustling prostitute. Therefore, I rather consider her a courtesan (Greek: ἑταίρα). Greek culture teems with such personalities as Aspasia, Rhodopis, and Thais; but for me Delilah conjures up the unforgettable Tabubu of Demotic tales regarding Prince Setne Khamwas, son of Ramses II.<sup>5</sup> Setne falls in violent lust for Tabubu ("The moment Setne saw her, he did not know where on earth he was ..."). Daughter of the prophet of Bastet though she may have been, the woman was actually for hire, but at the highest price and at her own staging. Tabubu ("She of Splendor") does not easily surrender to Setne; but at successive inflammations of his desire, she cajoles from him his fortune, his property, and his own children's death. Unlike in the romances and the movies, however, professionals like Tabubu hardly return a customer's love, a point we might keep in mind when we get back to our story.

### *The Philistines*

Aside from (incongruent) mention in Genesis (21 and 26) where, grudgingly or otherwise, they assist the patriarchs, the Philistines are not yet the formidable military force that thwarted Israel's incipient monarchy. Earlier in Judges (3:31, 10:6-7), the Philistines are a menace to Israel and an instrument for God's punishment of a stiff-necked people. In the Samson story, they are settled folks who tend vineyards, olive groves, and wheat fields. Their citizens dress fashionably enough to embolden bandits into raiding them. Sophisticated and urbane, they do not shun intercourse with Hebrews and do not object to their daughters marrying one of their (barbarically) circumcised male

4. Cited from Danby 1933: 281. The same for Pseudo-Philo (*LAB* 44.1, where she is Dedila; cited from Harrington 1985) and Milton (*Samson Agonistes*).

5. Translation in Lichtheim 1980: 127-51. Citations are from pages 133 and 134. A fine study that brings out the humor of the tale is Jasnow 2001; see especially 73-81.

neighbors. In all, hardly the material for an uncouth “philistine” as enshrined in our dictionaries.<sup>6</sup> Still, the image we have of them in our pages reminds most of the Roman legions in the Gaul of Asterix and Obelix, the famous French-language cartoon characters. Domineering and ferocious though they were, the Philistine fighters would receive repeated drubbings from Samson, who bludgeons them with delight and abandon.

### God

In this scene, the Hebrew God is not a conspicuous character until its final moments, when he begins to take charge of the ensuing staging. Until then, God had dominated *Judges*, from its opening giving it pulse and trajectory. As the Hebrew historiographers have it, God was testing how best to transit a people from slavery to dominance over nations not willing to be dispossessed. He would remain their God and King, sole proprietor of the conquered land he wishes to distribute among Hebrew tribes.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, he would rely on an unpredictable series of selected leaders (*šōfēṭ*, traditionally “judge”), from diverse tribes (mostly northern), from both sexes, and different in character or temper. Each would rescue penitent Israel from its harassers, giving it stability and dominance that was expected to endure when the judge leaves the stage a generation or so later. The plan hardly worked effectively, such that at one point (10:16), and totally exasperated by Israel’s cyclical failures, God withdraws from the rescue business, leaving it for manipulators like Jephthah to fill the vacuum. There will be more judges, of course, among them Ibzan, Elon, Abdon; but with Samson and soon also Eli and Samuel, their titles will hardly match God’s original notion of their function.<sup>8</sup> God could not remain in sole control of kingship for much longer. As Mesopotamians recognized generations earlier (The Sumerian King List, among others), it will need to come down to earth for humans to govern themselves adequately.

### Love

In the Hebrew Bible, love sings in poetry (Song of Songs), preaches in prose (Proverbs), and expounds on divine ardor in a variety of prophetic modes. Tales abound about human affection, constancy, but also lust and revulsion. To express love, there are metaphors construing *nefēš* (“soul”) with *dāvaq* and *hāšaq bē-* or *lē-* (“attaching” or “joining” to something or someone). Several derivatives of the verb *\*ydd* share an asso-

6. A slew of excavation reports supports this vision of them, perhaps marred only by their apparent consumption of dogs; see Killebrew and Lehmann 2013; Maier and Hitchcock 2017; and Maier 2018. For dog consumption, see Lev-Tov, et al. 2018.

7. Judges 10:16b, *vattiqšar nafšō bā’āmal yisrā’el*, hardly “he could not bear the miseries of Israel” (TNT) as it is commonly translated, but “he lost patience with Israel’s behavior.”

8. I have deployed reasons and arguments for these positions in many pages of Sasson 2014, especially at 412–16. A succinct picture is in Sasson 2013.

ciation with “love, lovemaking, loving.” None of these terms in their amatory sense occurs in *Judges*, a book given over to wars and power plays; <sup>3</sup>*āhēv*, however, does. Except for one pietistic expression (at 5:31), its few attestations there are all from the Samson tales. In one striking moment, frustrated for denying her an answer to a riddle, Samson’s Timnah bride-to-be accuses him of hating rather than loving her (14:16). Who knows whether she was delusional or merely crafty in her expectations?

In Delilah’s case, however, the narrator reveals that Samson is in love (16:4)—not unusual when a young man experiences a practiced lover. Yet, this striking detail invites us to consider the emotional state in which Samson might wish to prompt an equivalent response in a partner. Unlike the one-night stand he had with the Gaza whore, when we meet God’s chosen judge in Delilah’s chamber he had already confessed his love (16:15). We have no idea how long he nurtured his crush before doing so; but it must have been lengthy enough for the Philistines to learn his whereabouts, caucus on a strategy to capture him, and travel to meet with Delilah. Using the same language as when haranguing the Timnah bride, the leaders want Delilah to “deceive him” (*pattī* <sup>3</sup>*ōtō*), this time wisely using carrots (mindboggling stacks of shekels; 16:5) rather than sticks (“... lest we set you and your family on fire; 14:15) to persuade her. They wish her to find out “what makes his strength so great and what would give us control of him so as to bind him for degradation (*bammeh kōhō gādōl* <sup>3</sup>*ūvammeh nūkal lô va* <sup>3</sup>*āsarēnūhū lē* *annōtō*).” Delilah may (or may not) have needed the Philistines to explain what they hoped to achieve once in possession of Samson’s secret; but they make it clear that having this knowledge would permit them to neutralize its effect.<sup>9</sup> With it, they will no longer fear a repeat of what had happened earlier: Samson breaking his chains and massacring hundreds of them (15:14–16). Little did the Philistines know that his strength came from an infusion of divine power rather than any secrets Samson could reveal. They were now in the realm of fantasy, if not also magic, which is where our story will take us next.

## The Staging

I now offer just a smidgen of excerpts from ancient instructions on how to improve a love life:

You weave together into a single strand the tendons of a gazelle, [hemp,] and red wool; you tie it into fourteen knots. Each time you tie a knot, you recite the incantation. The woman places this cord around her waist, and she will be loved.<sup>10</sup>

9. They say that they wish to bind him. As we recall from execration texts excavated in the ancient world, binding is itself a magical prelude to overpowering an enemy. On the execration texts, see conveniently Seidlmayer 2001: 487–89.

10. Reiner (1966: 93, cited in English from Faraone 1999: 101–2). This advice is for a Mesopotamian

To make a woman “talk,” you wrap in goat hair: *mēsu*-wood, boxwood, ...-stone, cress, and the tongue of a partridge(?). You place it at the head of your bed. Then that woman will “talk” to you, wherever you meet her; she will not be able to help it. You can make love to her.<sup>11</sup>

You take a harp string (and) tie three knots in it; you recite the incantation seven times, you tie it around his right and left hands and then he will recover potency.<sup>12</sup>

She hangs these (i.e., the clothes or hair of the man) from a peg and heats them up with burning sulfur, sprinkling salt over the fire, and says in addition the names of both people, his and yours...<sup>13</sup>

For quieting the anger of a man: take a six-ply thread and double it/ twice and tie it into seven knots. You should say on each and every knot/ (...) that you may quiet the anger of such-and-such and he should revert from his anger and he will do the words of his lovers and friends who are such-and-such (adapted from Saar 2017: 53 n. 66).

With these useful amatory lessons in mind, let us go back to our drama.

We do not know how soon after her commission Delilah puts her plan to action; but the narrator moves into it promptly. Amit (1999: 286; 2014: 531) points out that the construction relies on a pattern already observed in Jotham’s fable (Judg 9:8–15): three failed attempts, capped by a successful fourth. As she seeks to ferret out Samson’s secret, Delilah will harass him with four reiterations of the Philistine rulers’ own directives (at vss 6, 10, 13, 15). Yet, at each rehearsal, she either trims the formula or accents a segment of it. For example, in her first address to Samson, Delilah simply rephrases the original directive. For obvious reasons, she drops the middle phrase, “... what would give us control of him?” She also avoids revealing who might be doing

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woman with an angry husband. Incantations for the lovelorn (addressing Ištar) commonly repeat seven times, either before or after the act itself. Geller (2002) notes similarity between Mesopotamian love-magic and other lore from antiquity. This type of magic is widely practiced across time and space. Faraone’s chapter (1999: 119–30) “Narcotics and Knotted Cords: The Subversive Cast of Philia Magic” is delightful. Ogden (2002) collects much lore on erotic magic as practiced in antiquity; see in particular chapter 11. Rabbinic Judaism struggled (to little avail) against such magical practices, ranging them among “Amorite practices”; see Bloom 2007: 133, 168 and elsewhere.

11. Cited after Biggs 1967: 71 (KAR 61). *sudbubum* literally is to “make someone talk”; in this context it connotes compliant sexually; see Geller 2002. The text gives other instructions for a successful seduction of a woman.

12. See Biggs 1967: 35–36 (#15). The incantation reads, “Let the wind blow! Let the grove quake! Let the clouds gather! Let the moisture fall! Let my potency be flowing river water! Let my penis be a (taut) harp string so that it will not slip out of her!”

13. Faraone 1999: 150–51, citing Lucian (*Dialogues of the Courtesans* 4.1) who reports on a Syrian sorceress’s formula for retrieving a lover.

Table 1. Queries and Answers in Judg 16

16:5 Rulers to Delilah Beguile him and find out	16:6-7 Delilah to Samson I Do tell me	16:10-11 Delilah to Samson II You deceived me just now, speaking lies to me!	16:13 Delilah to Samson III Even now you are deceiving me, speaking lies to me!	16:15, 17 Delilah to Samson IV How could you say, I love you, when your heart is not with me,
what makes his strength so great	what makes your strength so great			not revealing to me what makes your strength so great?
and what would give us control of him. We will bind so as to <i>humiliate</i> him.	<i>and how might you be bound so as to humiliate you?</i>	<i>Now, you must reveal to me how you might be bound?</i>	<i>You must reveal to me how you might be bound?</i>	
	If I were bound with seven fresh sinews that have yet to dry up ... I would then weaken and become as any other man.	If I were firmly bound by ropes that are new and that were never used on any job, I would weaken and become as any other man.	If you would weave the seven braids on my head into the fabric on a loom ...	... If my hair is cut, my strength would desert me. I would weaken then and become as any other man.

the binding by relying on the passive conjugation of the relevant verb (*tē' āsēr*, “you might be bound”). Not as obvious is why she would retain *lē' annōtekā*, “for degradation,” unless the form also conveys the promise of esoteric sensuality. Table 1 might help shape an overview for pair of query-answer.

### *Sinews and Ropes*

It is difficult to gauge over how many séances Delilah deployed her wiles. Aristotelian poetics would favor a threefold unity, of which we have undoubtedly two: of action and of space. The third, of time, is harder to sustain due to the diverse appeals to Philistine leaders/ambushers and the reference to occasional naps Samson takes. Nonetheless, the narrator intimates such a triune temporal concord in covering the fourfold requests and responses. The pattern is repetitious: Delilah poses her question; Samson gives her an answer. She follows his instruction, then tests each trial by sounding the same alarm (“Philistines upon you, Samson!”).

Samson manages to fool her three times; so much so, that he hardly bothers to search for ambushers. The fourth one, as we all know, proves the charm (for her).<sup>14</sup> While I leave it to my Commentary to discuss the particulars in each of the tests, I would note that the first two aim to immobilize Samson by using implements of diverse properties as well as by multiplying their numbers—seven being a particular favorite for its presumed effectiveness. In the first case, seven *yētārīm*, “tendons, sinew” (elsewhere used to string bows, as in Ps 11:2), still fresh (*lahīm*, elsewhere said of grapes or rods) and beyond withering (*lō' hōrāvū*).<sup>15</sup> In the second, she is to truss him with “ropes” (or “garlands,” as in Ps 118:27) that are brand new (*‘āvōtīm ḥādāšīm*) and “never put to use.” Once again, we are in the realm of sympathetic magic, in which fate is subject to human manipulation of symbolic objects.

### *Fabric, Peg, and Loom*

On the third attempt to discover Samson’s secret, Delilah repeats her jeremiad, but displays her impatience by substituting *‘ad-hennā*, “even now,” for the previous *hinnē*, “just now.” Samson’s latest instruction to her completely skips over the usual detailing of the consequences, leaving it to Delilah (and to us) to surmise the outcome. The clause is brief; yet two of its nouns occur nowhere else in Scripture, so deciphering its meaning is circumstantial albeit fairly certain. One is *mahlēfōt* (plural of *mahlāfā*): There are

14. We do notice, however, that the Philistines (or the narrator) tire from the exercise, as they stay in ambush just on the first two installments.

15. Not fully appreciating the magical allusion, some translations (among them JPS’s) give “rope” or the like. The Greek versions similarly alludes to sinew (νευρά, Latin nervis). Josephus gives “fresh vine-shoots.” On discussing two divergent notions for *yētārīm*, Marcos (2011: 96\*) hints, “both materials ... may be connected with magical practices.”

seven of them; Delilah cuts them (16:19); but when at 16:22 they are cited as head-hair (*šē ar-rōʿš*), they sprout once again. The other *hapax* in this passage is *masseket*. Debated is whether to derive it from the root \**skk*, (from which *sukkā*, “tent” likely derives) or, as plausible, from \**nsk* (as in *massekā*, “a molten object,” as in idols). This *masseket*, however, will shortly prove to be a woven fabric, perhaps as in the *massēkā* of Isa 25:7 and 28:20. The key to our phrase, however, is Samson’s counsel *ʾim-ta ʾargī* (“if you would weave ...”) for elsewhere the verb *ʾārag* clearly has to do with weaving. How to tie all three elements—the locks, the fabric, and the weaving—is a challenge. In the literature, there are many philological contortions about it (including mine), much of it relying on expansive Greek versions to surmount the terse obscurity of the Hebrew.<sup>16</sup> As observed above (at 16:6–7), weaving and tying knots are essential components of love charms and there is reason to suppose that infatuated Samson is concocting yet another magical path by which to inflame Delilah’s sexual desire.<sup>17</sup> It is essential to realize, therefore, that we are not dealing with a dimwit who repeatedly cannot decipher Delilah’s unsightly couched objectives; rather, we are observing a besotted swain who, having thrown caution to the wind, would use magic to ensnare a beloved. What is delicious in the scene as plotted is how clashing motivations run contrapuntally: Samson obstinately plays for love; Delilah only has shekels in mind.

### *Final Attempt*

Of greater import to our saga is Delilah’s fourth try, this time seemingly crowned with success. Citing the reference to hair in the previous account, some commentators suggest that Delilah had already breached his resolve. Still, she had to vex him much before he blurted out what seemed to her a completely truthful answer. Samson’s strategy here is camouflaged by the narrator’s notice that he “poured his heart out” to Delilah (*vayyaged-lāh ʾet-kol-libbō*), thus deceptively suggesting that the true source of Samson’s power is now hers to know. In fact, Samson was trying a new way to sharpen her desire, as this was the primary goal of invoking magical practices. We need to keep in mind that in the Timnah episode, when his panicking companion coaxed from him a solution to the riddle he had posed to her compatriots, Samson revealed only its partial solution.<sup>18</sup> The Philistines echoed the deficient solution he had fed his potential bride,

16. Josephus (*Ant. V*, 311), simply summarizes “... he told her the third time that his hair should be woven into a web.”

17. Niditch (2008a: 169) is not alone to suspect “subversive play in an erotic context”; but the insight is hardly sustained and Niditch does not develop thematic implications from it. Joshua Berman (Bar-Ilan) kindly referred me to Isaac Abravanel’s comments on 16:10–13c in his *Former Prophet* commentary, where he highlights the erotic potential of the scene.

18. I explore the details fully in my forthcoming *Commentary* and succinctly in an upcoming study (Sasson forthcoming) dedicated to a colleague. The riddle had two phrases of three words each, both of which share the same verb, and each contains more or less contrastive elements. The first, “from the eater out came the eaten” might apply to many carnivores. The second, “from the powerful out

allowing Samson to recognize the true source of their response, thus justifying the successive havoc he wrecked on them.

This strategy may obtain here as well. I will not dwell now on how she soothed him to sleep, how his hair got cut, and how the Philistines seized and blinded him, each a topic with its own *megillah*; see for now Sasson 2008. Yet it is important to stress the narrator's comment (at 16:20), "... for [Samson] did not realize that the LORD was fully deserting him." That highly intrusive assertion proves to be clue to the architecture of the Samson's stories, for it invites us to link what might be a motif in Samson's fall with a theme that runs through the entire series of his tales.

#### Headhair of a Nazir

*I've never really understood Samson's hair:  
Its immense secrecy, its Nazirite mystery,  
The prohibition (perfectly understandable) against talking about it,  
The constant fear of loss of locks, the endless dread  
Of Delilah's light caress... (Natan Zach, "Samson's Hair")<sup>19</sup>*

How to groom headhair is the subject of many monographs. It was manipulated to characterize status, accent gender distinction, symbolize transitions in and out of sacrality, assert personal choices, as well as impose humiliation. A fine one relating to our topic is Niditch (2008b), subtitled "Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel." It reviews major biblical episodes in which hair has a role to play.<sup>20</sup> Naturally, Niditch writes about

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came the sweet," is more slippery as the words suggest multiple applications. Nonetheless, with their solution, "What is sweeter than honey and what is stronger than a lion?" the Philistines successfully resolved only *the contrasts* among the pairings. They connected "sweet" with "honey" and "powerful" with "lion." Understandably, however, they remained clueless about the *linkage* between the two phrases, namely, how honey can come out from a lion. To explain this association, they had to be there ... but they were not. Samson could have declared victory; but he did not!

19. Natan Zach (1930–), "Samson's Hair (*'et se' aro shel Shimshon*)" cited from Bargad and Chyet 1986: 132–33. He goes on to versify on Absalom's hair.

20. As a vehicle for contrast (Jacob versus hairy Esau, Gen 27), as an agent of death (Absalom, 2 Sam 18), as an instrument of humiliation (David's envoys, 2 Sam 10), as a channel for holiness (Nazir, Num 6), as a medium for transformation (captive bride, Deut 2:10–14), and as a catalyst in ordeals (Sotah, Num 5). Whether to keep the hair free-flowing, shaping it into bun(s), braiding into ropes, or twisting it into locks (as did Samson), was apparently a personal decision. From the literature about hair-growth I learned that when left unshorn the head-hair of men goes through an anagen stage, increasing by half an inch a month, so about six inches (fifteen cms) a year. It will continue to grow decreasingly for a handful of years, virtually stopping by the fifth year. When it falls out naturally during that period, it replaces itself. Only occasionally does it reach beyond thirty inches (75 cm). Sikh men, who do not cut their hair (anywhere) during their lifetime, roll their head-hair under a headgear, most often a turban. In Israel, men trimmed their long head-hair to avoid becoming hirsute (2 Sam 14:26), keeping it just below the nape, perhaps on visiting barbers (*gallāvīm*, Ezek 5:1). Ideally, they might oil their locks shiny (*qēvuṣṣōt*) and shape them curled (*taltallim*), perhaps in imitation of Mesopotamia grooming where elite wore theirs either bobbed or curled at the base of the nape. Comments on hair

Samson's, but (in my opinion) she muddies the issues when coupling Samson's singular tenure as a Nazir with elements of the practice presented in legal formulation (Num 6). In fact, they are barely harmonizable, as are most biblical examples that straddle genres.

Hair as a motif in narratives is common to many literatures. From Enkidu's luxuriant growth and Medusa's venomous curls, to Rapunzel's endless tresses, lore linking the corporeal and the magical inherent to headhair is driven by human physiognomy and therefore is not likely unique to any culture. While cutting a protagonist's hair can be an element for plots (Haase 2007: 435–36), surprisingly, the lore linking hair and strength is not plentiful. D1831 in Stith Thompson's remarkable compendium of motifs cites a few (among them Samson's) with such a conjunction, although restoration to happiness is also a feature.<sup>21</sup> A Greek myth tells of Scylla (not of Charybdis fame), daughter of a king (Nisos) who was unconquerable as long as he sported a bright lock of hair. Besotted with Minos, an enemy of her father, Scylla drugs Nisos before snipping the magical lock. Her betrayal results in her father's death, her lover's rejection, and her own dismal end (Graves 1955: 308–11 §91). Actually, Delilah pays the ultimate price only in the Byzantine *Palaea Historica* (136) and in Cecil B. DeMille's immortal *Samson and Delilah*.<sup>22</sup>

## The Plot

### *Hair Again*

Still, a number of questions about the famous scene come to mind. To begin with, there is absolutely no suggestion anywhere in Scripture that a Nazir morphed into Hercules just by avoiding cutting his hair. There is no hint of such an eventuality, neither when the angel spoke to Samson's mother nor when Samson stumbles into Dagon's temple. It might therefore be unreasonable to conjecture that only in this Scriptural context (at 16:19, 22) does the link between uncut hair and human strength occur. Samson himself had a cavalier attitude toward his own hair, displaying no apprehension about its manipulation into a loom. Too, given that Delilah had always followed his instruction on defusing his power, Samson could expect her to shear him no matter what her motivation. Delilah certainly wished to betray Samson for wealth; but neither she nor the Philistines learned (until too late) that cutting his hair was hardly the path to neutralize him.

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and grooming in Israel and neighboring lands (with bibliography) are in Wilson and Rodriguez in the *DDL* 2:381–94. In the Lachish reliefs from Sennacherib's palace (late eighth century BCE), Judeans sport shortish hairdos, somewhat curly. The scholarly convention is that Assyrian artists strove for accuracy. I have my doubts.

21. Thompson, 1956: 338. Accessible online at <https://archive.org/details/B-001-002-579/page/n341>. Notice an addition from Chios to the collection is in Argenti and Rose 1949: 531–32.

22. Less prudent modern scholars have proposed (after rabbinic lore) that she survived to mother Micah of Ephraim, a character in a later chapter of Judges.

All these observations suggest to me that far from revealing the true source of his extraordinary power (divine infusion), Samson was proposing yet another method by which to coax Delilah's ardor. A confirmation is that on awakening—and despite the likelihood of spotting tons of hair about him—Samson never doubted his capacity to muscle his way back into normalcy. Once again, he felt ready to hammer any attacking Philistines: “I will breakout as time after time, and will shake free” (16:20). The formulaic language applies to the previous trials but it is hardly relevant here. An even stronger corroboration for Samson's deceitful strategy is the narrator's insertion (also at 16:20) that credits God—not the shorn hair—for weakening his chosen judge.<sup>23</sup> We also note that by waxing autobiographical on the fourth go-round with Delilah—a strategy he had already employed in a Timnah bedchamber (14:16)—Samson was once again conveying partial truth, this time implying a connection between hair and power, just as earlier in their involvement he had made similarly false conjunctions. Finally, as we turn to the concluding scene, we hear nothing more about hair. Never once does the blinded Samson display trust in its magical powers by checking on its growth. Neither did the Philistines, for that matter.

### *The Fallout*

Over the centuries, the narrator's notice about Samson's hair sprouting even as it was cut (16:22) has misdirected many commentators into pursuing an equation between hair shorn and power lost. In fact, the observation does serve as a clue; but it is that as far as God was concerned Samson breached his Nazir status, but it can be restored; for legal formulations did indeed provide for both its interruption and resumption.<sup>24</sup> Unfolding from this juncture, however, is the gathering of intriguing threads deployed earlier in the Samson narratives. An explanation shapes the concluding paragraph, with supporting evidence reserved for my Commentary; see for now Sasson 2019.

Countless reports from Mesopotamia to Rome inform us on the fate of an especially hated yet worthy antagonist. The captured nemesis is often maimed but kept alive to be paraded in chains. At a festive moment, in public and normally within sight of the gods, the victim is led out for execution. Gideon executed in this manner the Midianite chieftains Zebah and Zalmunna (Judg 8:18–21). The same fate likely pursued

23. Amit (2009: 305) makes the same observation but draws from it a different conclusion. Others offer a similar opinion, for example, Guillaume (2004: 189) “There is no magical power in Samson's hair, his comes from YHWH and he is like any other man as soon as YHWH turns away from him (v. 20).” Less felicitous is his equation of Delilah's deed with Shamhat's taming of Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic.

24. As far as the ritual status of a Nazir, even those who are contaminated could restore it by shaving their heads and resume their practice of unshorn hair after the proper sacrifices; see Num 6:9–13. Amusing is the take in the *Palaea Historica* (Adler 2013: 655), where a servant (obviously not a Philistine) helps Samson (and God) by pouring water on Samson's head to speed hair sprout.

Adoni-bezeq by Jerusalem, after his captors severed his thumbs and toes (Judg 1:6-7). Therefore, as Samson entered the temple and heard the bellows of a thousand throats, he knew that the jig was up: he would not be returning to his cell. Only in an extended sense, therefore, might we apply the term suicide (as is frequently done) to how he ended his own life.

Once Samson sets himself between the central pillars of a Gaza temple, the entire series of his tales refocuses on the narrator's famously obtrusive insertion early in the Samson saga, when Samson expressed a desire for forbidden flesh. We learned then (at 14:4) that his parents did not know "that this was from the Lord, for he was prodding a reaction from the Philistines." In this phrase, the antecedent "he" is indefinite: while it certainly refers to God, it might also have Samson in mind. This ambiguity therefore alerts us to the unfolding of two parallel programs, neither one of which excludes the other.

With his final words, Samson shows no remorse; rather, he solicits one more proof of God's favor by which to turn the Philistines' celebration into monumental grieving. In effect, Samson is now completing the final act in a *picaresque* tale, wherein he would be the one "prodding a reaction from the Philistines." Yet, Samson may also have sensed that he had become a human instrument in an embryonic *theomachy*, a battle among the gods. For this take, I am reminded of the second version of a Hittite tale in which the Storm god Tarhunz uses a mortal to confound his enemy, the dragon Iluyankas (Hoffner 1998: 13). Noteworthy is that this young man, like Samson, was also destined to die for his role in the divine confrontation. Applied to our case, then, God would now be the subject of the phrase, "he was prodding a reaction from the Philistines." This particular manifestation of the heavenly contest would pit the God of Israel against the Philistine god Dagon. It was to be just one volley in a longer match between them. I need not spoil it for Norma by divulging who will emerge triumphant in this (lopsided) battle.

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