

Samson: Hero or Fool?

The Many Faces of Samson

*edited by Erik Eynikel
and Tobias Nicklas*



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Samson: Hero or Fool?

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2014

Cover illustration: Gustave Doré, 'Samson terrasse le lion', engraving from: *La Bible. Illustrée par Gustave Doré* (1866–1874).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Samson : hero or fool? : the many faces of Samson / edited by Erik Eynikel, Tobias Nicklas.
pages cm. — (Themes in biblical narrative: Jewish and Christian traditions, ISSN 1388-3909 ;
VOLUME 17)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-90-04-26217-1 (hardback : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-90-04-26236-2 (e-book) 1. Samson
(Biblical judge)—Congresses. 2. Bible. Judges XVI–XVIII—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—
Congresses. I. Eynikel, Erik, editor of compilation.

BS580.S15S26 2014

222'.32092—dc23

2013037606

This publication has been typeset in the multilingual “Brill” typeface. With over 5,100 characters covering Latin, IPA, Greek, and Cyrillic, this typeface is especially suitable for use in the humanities. For more information, please see www.brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 1388-3909

ISBN 978-90-04-26217-1 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-26236-2 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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PREFACE

Samson is a peculiar character. He is the most powerful major judge of the Israelite judges and three whole chapters in the book of Judges are allocated to him. On the other hand, he does demonstrate many features of weakness, not the least of which is a weakness for the charms of women. In the international conference “Samson: Hero or Fool?”, organised at the University of Nijmegen in April 2008, Judges 16–18 was studied from different perspectives, demonstrating the complex character of this (anti) hero. It was quickly determined that the simple dichotomy of ‘Hero’ or ‘Fool’ does not accurately represent Samson. J. Cheryl Exum expressed the complexity of his figure in the Hebrew Bible very well in her contribution: “The Many Faces of Samson”, where she analysed the character of Samson in multifaceted categories. She shows that complexity and multiplexity of the picture depends heavily upon the number of viewpoints we take.

These different aspects of Samson’s character lived on in the later traditions of this judge, in ancient and modern literature, in music, in fine arts and in film. The contributions of this volume discuss this reception history about Samson in the later Jewish, Christian and Islamic literature, along with his presentation in figurative and performing arts, as it is customary in the series “Themes in Biblical Narrative”. Due to the multiple images that Samson presents in the Hebrew Bible and in the later literature, we thought it was fitting to apply the title of Exum’s essay “The Many Faces of Samson”, as the subtitle for this volume.

Before entering the reception history of Judges 16–18, some of the contributors to this volume focused their attention to discussing specific questions about the text. Some of these questions have long been a point of debate: “The Structure and Meaning of the Samson Narrative” (Elie Assis) and “Who Cut Samson’s Hair” (Cornelis Houtman); while other are new questions: “A Hero Ensnared in Otherness: Literary Images of Samson” (Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher), and “Samson and Samuel: Two Examples of Leadership” (Lara van der Zee).

The reception of Samson in the literature of Antiquity and the Middle-Ages is studied by Natalio Fernández Marcos (the Septuagint), Ronit Nikolsky (the Rabbinic Literature), Tessel Jonquière (Josephus), Tobias Nicklas (the New Testament) and Erik Eynikel (Islamic Historiography).

The modern interpretations of the Samson character are the topics of the articles by Kees Wisse (Samson in Music), Karin Schöpflin (the European Literature), Klaas Spronk (Fine Arts) and Reinhold Zwick (Film); which closes this rich palette of viewpoints on Samson, as visioned through the ages.

I thank personally, also in name of my colleague and co-editor Tobias Nicklas, the contributors to this volume for their essays, but also for their patience during the long time it has taken to publish them due to several circumstances that, beyond our will, slowed down the project. I further want to express my gratitude to the editorial board of “Themes in Biblical Narrative”, and in particular its assistant editor Freek van der Steen, and also the staff of the Koninklijke Brill NV in Leiden for their assistance and editorial advise.

Erik Eynikel

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THE STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF THE SAMSON NARRATIVES
(JUD. 13–16)

Elie Assis

The Samson narrative is unique in the Book of Judges (Zakovitch 2005). The narrative does not fall naturally into the general framework of the book (McKenzie 1966). In contrast to its other narratives, Samson does not appear as a response to Israel's cry to God, and he does not deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. This, in fact, was not his intention. His confrontations with the Philistines are the outcome of his own personal machinations.

The most enigmatic aspects of the narrative are his enormous strength and his weakness for women. His physical abilities are prodigious and superhuman. No man was to defeat him and his downfall was his own doing, because he revealed the secret of his strength to Delilah. This unique strength is connected with another anomaly. As a Nazarite, Samson is prohibited from cutting his hair. But later in the story it emerges that his strength is dependent on his hair, and when he is seduced to reveal his secret, and his hair is cut off, he immediately loses his extraordinary power.

The dominant theme of the story is Samson's obsession with women, which is described repeatedly and in detail throughout the narrative (Exum 1993). He goes from one woman to another. Though his parents tried to dissuade him from marrying a Philistine, he insists on following his own instincts. When his efforts to unite with his Philistine wife fail, he finds relief in the arms of a Philistine prostitute. He then falls in love with Delilah, and this love, too, seems to be no more than sexual attraction. Why did the author-editor of Judges devote such a large part of the narrative to such a problematic character who spends his time lusting after women?

Scholars usually tend to resolve these problems by relating to the negative message of the story. Von Rad, for instance, claims that Samson wastes the powers bestowed upon him by God, and he does not live up to the expectations of him as a Nazarite. He is the perfect example of what a charismatic leader should not be. This approach was adopted by many scholars who think that the main purpose of chapter 13 is to present the

expectations of Samson as a Nazarite, while chapters 14–16 portray his failure to live up to the expectations of him as a man of God (von Rad 1962, 333–334; Blenkinsopp 1963).¹

Crenshaw thinks that the story is designed to indicate the dangers of relationships with foreign women. If the mighty Samson cannot succeed in this sphere then it must be a sphere in which the common Israelite is doomed to failure (Crenshaw 1979, 129–148; Crenshaw 1992, 954).

Klein also thinks that the core of the narrative is the presentation of Samson as a Judge who fails, despite the spirit of God which stirred in him. In her analysis, she compares Samson with the Judges who precede him. While they were each disadvantaged by a specific weakness, in the story of his birth, Samson is advantaged as a man of God. Against the high expectation of Samson as Israel's last hope, he is a disappointment (Klein 1988, 117–118). In her words: "The narratives of the preceding Judges call attention to Samson as a 'dead end'" (Klein 1988, 132). Amit is of the opinion that the purpose of the story is to portray the failure of the leadership of the Judges prior to the detailed depiction of anarchy at the end of the book, as a lead-in to the change of leadership—the kingship (Amit 1999, 266–267).

There are difficulties with each of the above opinions, but I would like to emphasize one difficulty related to this approach in general. In spite of the prominent presentation of Samson's weaknesses, Samson succeeds in all his plans against the Philistines. He fails only when he reveals to Delilah that he is a Nazarite. And even after that, God still helps him in causing major destruction to his enemies in the temple of Dagon (16:23–30). The negative side of Samson does not cause the divine spirit to be removed from him; on the contrary, Samson achieves the goal defined in the narrative of his birth in Ch. 13:5: "he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (Exum 1983). Moreover, after his nativity story in Ch. 13, the status of Samson as a Nazarite is not mentioned in the entire Samson narrative (Exum 1983, 31–32). The greatest triumph of Samson over his enemies lies in the last episode, in which Samson dies together with his enemies, just as he requested from God. While this characterizes the story as a tragedy, at the same time it portrays Samson as a hero, and can no way be the ending to a story that is meant to portray a disappointing, failed judge.²

¹ On Samson's role as a Nazarite throughout the Samson saga see: Jonker 1992.

² A very different solution to the peculiarities of the Samson narrative was offered by Greenstein. In his opinion the Samson narrative is an allegory for Israel's violation of the covenant, Greenstein 1981.

By examining the structural elements of the narrative, both its meaning and the peculiarities of Samson's character are brought to light. Leaving aside the story of Samson's birth in Chapter 13, Exum demonstrated the parallelism between Chapters 14–15 and Chapter 16.

These two sections open and close in a similar way. In the first section the woman of Timnah manages to elicit Samson's secret from him, and in the second part, Delilah manages to educe the secret of Samson's strength. Both the women implore Samson to "tell" (14:16; 16:6, 10, 13). In both cases he reveals the secret "because she pressed him hard" (14:17) and "when she pressed him hard" (16:16). Each of the women tells him that he does not love her so as to get his secret from him (14:16; 16:15). In both sections it is the Philistines who are behind the women's actions and in both sections he breaks his bonds and releases himself (15:14; 16:9, 12). Both sections end with a climax, in which Samson prays to God, alluding to the subject of death. According to Exum the message is that when in need, Samson prays to God and God answers his prayers. The strong man cannot save himself. Even when the Philistines spare his life, his death is dependent on God alone. God grants Samson salvation and victory, as well as life (in the first section) and death (in the second) (Exum 1981, 3–8).³

The structure that Exum proposes is compelling, but this is only one element of the structure of the Samson narrative. She emphasizes Samson's prayers at the end of each of the two parts of the narrative, and thus reaches her conclusion regarding its meaning. Here I wish to investigate another, I believe overlooked, structure of the narrative. Without relating to the stories of Samson's prayers I want to discuss the structure of the other four episodes, which as we will see, are all composed of the same structural elements:⁴

1. Samson's marriage with the Timnahite woman (Ch. 14)
2. The Timnahite wife episode (15:1–8)
3. Samson's visit to the prostitute from Gaza (16:1–3)
4. Samson and Delilah (16:4–21)

³ For a structural analysis of the Samson stories see: Freeman 1982. On Samson's prayer before his death, see Galpaz-Feller 2006.

⁴ If this argument is accepted, the unity of the Samson stories is then established. Against the suggestion that all episodes of the Samson Saga are independent, see e.g.: Soggin 1987, 230–231.

SAMSON'S MARRIAGE WITH THE TIMNAHITE WOMAN (CH. 14)

We are used to thinking of the Samson stories mainly as victorious accounts of a hero who fights on his own against the Philistine enemy of Israel. In the first narrative it is evident that this is not the case. Out of the twenty verses of this story only one describes the injury inflicted on the Philistines by Samson, 4:19.

The structure of the story may be outlined as follows:

1. vv. 1–4, The physical attraction of Samson to a Timnahite woman, and his refusal to listen to his parents' objection to his marriage to her.
2. vv. 5–9, Samson overcomes a lion.
3. vv. 10–14, At his engagement party Samson challenges the Philistines with a riddle.
4. vv. 15–18, The Timnahite woman entices Samson to reveal his riddle, and she discloses the solution to the Philistines.
5. vv. 19–20, Samson kills thirty Philistines and takes their garments to give to the Philistines who solved the riddle.

What is the thread that ties the different parts of the narrative together? Why does the narrator expand on the issues of the dialogue between Samson and his parents, the wedding party and the riddle, on the one hand, but on the other, compress his extraordinary act of killing thirty Philistines?

My understanding is that all parts of the story are held together through a tension between Samson's strength and his weakness for the Timnahite woman.⁵ As we have seen, the story is made up of five parts. The last two parts are paralleled by the first two respectively, and the riddle is positioned in the middle.

In the first part (vv. 1–4) Samson's superficial attraction to the Timnahite is presented (Klein 1988, 118). But he appears to be strong-willed in his disregard of his parents' efforts to dissuade him from marrying her. Despite their reservations they seem to cooperate with Samson's plan to marry; if perhaps unwillingly. This opening of the story establishes a tension between Samson's enthusiastic attraction to the anonymous Timnahite and his obdurate position vis-à-vis his parents.

⁵ On Samson's physical power contrasted to his weakness for women see: Smith, 1997, 51–52.

In the second part, Samson appears as a man of unusual strength when he easily overcomes a lion.⁶ It is no coincidence that the narrator chose the lion—which is considered in the Bible to be the strongest of beasts (Prov 30:30; Isa 31:4; Mic 5:7. See also bHagiga 13a, where the lion, as in other cultures, is considered king of the animals).

As mentioned, the last two parts of the story parallel the first two respectively. In the fourth part the Timnahite is trying to influence Samson as in the first part his parents attempted to influence him. In the first part he maintains his position despite his parent's exhortations and it is they who actually concede to him against their better judgment. However, he succumbs to the Timnahite woman despite his original stance. This is emphasized in the narrative when he states that he had not disclosed the secret of the riddle even to his parents, making it all the more impossible for him to reveal it to the Timnahite.⁷

The second part describes Samson's unusual physical strength in his overcoming of a lion with his bare hands. Again the fifth part of the story depicts Samson's physical strength in his victory over thirty Philistines.

In the middle part of the story we encounter Samson's overconfidence (Klein 1988, 137). At a party celebrating his wedding to the Timnahite, he wagers with his guests that he will pay one garment to each one of the thirty men if they are able to solve his riddle, and take one garment from each one of the thirty if they fail to solve it.⁸ If he loses, his forfeit is high, while if he wins each Philistine's forfeit is small.

This suggests that he is confident he will win the wager. This confidence seems justified throughout the seven days of the party. On the third day, when the Philistines realise that they cannot win the bet, they threaten his new wife to cajole the answer from him and hand it over to them.

⁶ It is often understood that the kefir is a young lion, see Botterweck 1974, 376. Tur-Sinai, however, is of the opinion that kefir is a big lion, see in Bilik 1965, 562.

⁷ Samson's primary loyalty to his parents and not to his wife is a major theme in Crenshaw's understanding of the narrative's purpose, see, Crenshaw 1979, 65–98.

⁸ Several explanations have been given to the problem that the Philistines would have never figured the riddle, because it was based on a private experience of Samson. For solutions to this problem, see: Eynikel 2006. Bauer 1912 suggests that the riddle is based on a play of words לָאֵרֶס that can mean both lion and honey. This suggestion was developed by: Porter 1962. Indeed it is possible that Samson's confidence that they would not be able to solve the riddle was based on the fact that he was the only person who knew the solution. See also Schneider 2000, 208. For riddles that are based on private experiences of the storyteller, see: Norton 1942. Schipper has demonstrated the complex relationship between the riddle and the narrative surrounding it, see: Schipper 2003. According to Yadin, the *hida* is not a riddle but "a Greek *skolion* or 'capping song' that is quite well-attested at a wedding (and other) symposia", see: Yadin 2002. For another explanation see Nel 1985.

Samson is able to withhold the information until the seventh day when he realizes that he was deceived he goes to Ashkelon and kills thirty Philistines, takes their garments and pays his debt.

The contrast between Samson's weakness for the woman and his physical strength is the crux of the story. This idea is intensified by two factors. The first is the comparison between Samson's obstinacy in the argument with his parents and his submission to the pressure of his wife, and the second is his ironic exhibition of self-confidence in the riddle episode. Though it is not a question of physical strength here but rather one of willpower, in terms of the structural analysis of the story these qualities easily connect with the strong side of Samson's character.⁹

Samson's acts of strength are triggered by his weakness for women. In the first part of the narrative, his sexual desire precedes his victory over the lion. In the last part, he surrenders to the Timnahite, only to lose the bet, which brings him to fight against the Philistines. The story opens with sexual weakness and ends with physical strength.

I will now show that Samson's weakness for women in the stories functions as a catalyst for his unusual strength. This structural theme is repeated in all the four Samson stories discussed in this paper.¹⁰

THE TIMNAHITE WIFE EPISODE (15:1–8)

The abovementioned structure is repeated in the second Timnahite episode in a simpler way. This story also opens with a burst of Samson's lust, which is expressed bluntly and roughly. After he cools down from the previous confrontation he returns to his father-in-law and says, 15:1: אֲבִיָּהּ אֶל-אִשְׁתִּי הַחֲדָרָה. The New Revised Standard Version translates this as: "I want to go into my wife's room". This translation does not get to the real meaning of Samson's words in his biblical Hebrew. The phrase אֲבִיָּהּ אֶל-אִשְׁתִּי הַחֲדָרָה means "I will have sexual intercourse with my wife" and the word חֲדָר in this context means not to any "room" but to the "bedroom", making his request explicit and blunt. When he is refused by his father-in-law, who has meanwhile married her to someone else, once again another

⁹ Even if Gunn's opinion that Samson is interested in marriage rather than sex in this story is right, still the narrative portrays his weakness for the woman, as opposed to his strong stand against his parents. This is certainly his explicit wish in 15:1. See Gunn 1992, 232.

¹⁰ Vickery shows that a major part of the Samson narrative repeats Samson's sexual frustration, see: Vickery 1981.

enormous burst of physical strength is due. First, he catches three hundred foxes; he then ties their tails and attaches a torch to them, and causes great devastation to the Philistines (v. 8). Once again physical strength has been triggered by frustrated sexual desire.

SAMSON'S VISIT TO THE PROSTITUTE FROM GAZA (16:1–3)

The account of Samson's visit to the prostitute from Gaza is the shortest of all the Samson stories. Samson inflicts no harm on the Philistines in this episode, so scholars were puzzled as to its purpose within the Samson cycle (Gray 1986, 334; McKenzie 1966, 155).¹¹ If the thesis suggested in this paper is adopted, its meaning becomes clear. This story, as the two former stories, opens with Samson's lust for a woman, in this case with his visit to a prostitute. The Philistines attempt to capture him on his way out, but he leaves earlier than they expected. On leaving Gaza he uproots the city gates with the gateposts and its bar and carries them to the top of a mountain near Hebron, which is a significant distance from Gaza. This act of Samson's, certainly makes a laughingstock of the Philistines who tried to ambush him. Samson is presented again as having superhuman strength, immediately following the story of his satisfying his sexual appetite with the Philistine prostitute.

SAMSON AND DELILAH (16:4–21)

This story shares the same motifs of the earlier stories, but, being the climax of the Samson cycle, there are changes from the structure that has so far been dominant. That this story is the finale and climax of the cycle is evidenced by two points at its outset. This is the first time that the narrator attributes an emotion of love to Samson: "After that he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah", v. 4. It is also the first time that the woman's name is given. Just as in the other stories, in this one too, Samson's unusual strength is manifest. Three times Delilah

¹¹ Schneider claims that this episode is meant to portray Samson's interest in women, an interest that leads to his death in the next story. See Schneider 2000, 218. Similarly, Zakovitch 1982, 162 has already claimed that this episode is a sign of the beginning of Samson's downfall. He finds support for this claim in the fact that in this episode he goes to a prostitute in Gaza, and into Gaza the Philistines bring Samson, imprison and torture him (16:21). I cannot accept Klein's (Klein 1988, 120) claim that the prostitute woman symbolizes Israel's betrayal of God.

ties Samson up but each time he releases himself in a remarkable way. In contrast to the other stories, in this one Samson reaches a zenith in terms of his weakness for women.

The main difference between this story and the previous ones is that where previously sexual weakness triggers strength, in this one, his weakness for Delilah brings about his downfall. The Philistines understood that they cannot confront Samson directly. That is why at one point they force the men of Judah to surrender him (15:10–13). When they see that this does not work, they attempt to defeat Samson by turning his weakness against him. This is when the Philistines tempt Delilah to seduce Samson into revealing the secret of his strength.¹² From the start, Delilah makes no effort to hide her intention to bring about Samson's downfall. She bluntly asks him, v. 6: "Tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you". Samson gives her a false answer. But Delilah does not give up, and she asks him again to tell her "how you could be bound?", 16:10. This is repeated three times in the story and in detail.

The third time there are signs that Samson is starting to break. Now, even though he does not give her the true secret of his strength, in his answer he alludes to his hair, indicating that he is coming closer to breaking point and to revealing the full secret: "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else" (16:13) (Schneider 2000, 222). After he releases himself again, in her fourth and decisive attempt, she increases the pressure in a different way. "And she said to him: 'How can you say: I love you, when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me wherein your great strength lies' ", v. 15. Again Delilah makes no attempt to hide her intentions. He knows exactly what will happen if he reveals his secret (Merideth 1989, 71–73). Anyone else, being aware of his own weakness would, in such a dangerous situation, have fled the scene. But not Samson. Verses 16–17 state: "Finally, after she nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. So he told her his whole secret, and said to her, 'a razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave

¹² Delilah's motive was to earn eleven hundred pieces of silver from each of the lords of the Philistines 16:5. Yael's motive was not, thus I disagree with Ackerman (2000) that Delilah can be compared to Yael, even from a Philistine point of view.

me; I would become weak, and be like any other man". Why does he tell her? Is it because she nagged him? I doubt this, even if indeed she nagged him to death. It seems that she uses a different type of pressure. She withholds herself from him sexually so long as she is not convinced that he is telling the truth. Indeed, this seems to be the scene each time that he finds himself tied up as he wakes up. Apparently he falls asleep after he has had sexual intercourse with Delilah, and that is when she is able to tie him up. It is because of his desire for her that she is able to bring him to do what she wants. He is willing to die in order to have her, but she refuses to give him what he wants unless he gives her what she wants. He is ready to give up his life not because he is nagged but because he cannot overcome his desire for her. She takes advantage of his weakness in order to extort the information from him. This indeed was the intention of the Philistines when they say to Delilah: "*entice* him and find out what makes him so strong" (v. 5).¹³

Samson now reaches his point of greatest weakness, revealing to Delilah the secret of his strength. But a normal attraction to women would not explain his behaviour. The sexual instinct may be very strong, but the instinct to live is stronger. Behaving normatively a man would save himself from a situation such as this. But Samson, who knows exactly what the outcome of revealing his secret will be, reveals it in order to be with Delilah for one last time.¹⁴ His sexual desire for Delilah is stronger than his instinct for life.¹⁵ He chooses to spend a short time with Delilah even at the expense of his life (For the abnormality of his behaviour at this point, see: Soggin 1987, 257; Smith 1997, 52).

THE MEANING OF THE STRUCTURE

If I have claimed so far that Samson's strength is superhuman we can now assert that his weakness is extraordinary as well (Klein 1988, 118). The contrast between his weakness and his strength, that runs like a thread through the Samson episodes, reaches a climax at this point in the Delilah story.

¹³ Indeed, thus was understood in the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 9b: "What means 'and urged him'? R. Isaac of the school of R. Ammi said: at the time of consummation, she detached herself from him". See also Zakovitch 1982, 185.

¹⁴ For an analysis of this scene, see: Sasson 1988.

¹⁵ According to Shemesh Samson's impulsive character illustrates his self-destructive tendency. She proves her point in that Samson reveals his secret to Delilah even knowing the consequences. See Shemesh 2003, 10–13.

Exum and Whedbee maintain that this contrast is reinforced by a mixture of comic and tragic elements in the story (Exum and Whedbee 1985).

How does the complexity of Samson's character function within the meaning of the Samson narrative? Strangely, Samson's strength depends on his hair. If we were to choose a part of the body that has absolutely no influence on one's energy, it would be the hair—and yet it is precisely the hair that is the source of Samson's power. There are those who hold that the cutting of his hair is a violation of the Nazarite law, and that is why he loses his strength (Zakovitch 1982, 187, 193).¹⁶ This explanation is difficult for two reasons. First, it is likely that he had already desecrated the Nazarite prohibitions. This might have happened when he participated in his wedding party, and when he ate the honey that came from the corpse of the lion, that apparently was not in line with the Nazarite rules of purity (Jud 13:4). So it would seem that his Nazarite status was not the source of his power. Secondly, at the outset of the last episode it is written: "But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved" (16:22). Even though Samson's strength returns to him after his appeal to God, nevertheless the narrative points out that his hair had begun to grow, only because his hair is clearly the source of his strength (Klein 1988, 128).

I believe that the dependence of Samson's strength on his hair is meant to convey the idea that all strength is from God, and if Samson ignores this, his strength will be taken away from him. This notion is in line with the usual biblical concept of human dependence on God. This, however, is an incomplete picture. The dependence of Samson's power on his hair has a unique meaning that works differently than the usual biblical concept of human dependence on God. Samson's power is extraordinary, and the dependence of this power on his hair is extraordinary. But what happens if his miraculous power is taken away? Who is Samson now? Samson himself, without his special divine power, is not an ordinary man; he is an extraordinarily weak one. We would be then left with a man with normal strength, but with an extraordinary weakness for women. Samson without his supernatural power is an extremely weak man, unable to control his sexual desires, even if this involves him having to pay the highest possible price—his life. The strength that Samson has, works only against mighty

¹⁶ Niditch claims that the cutting of his hair by a razor, that is a culture's tool, changed Samson's natural status, and that is what makes him weak. See Niditch 1990, 616. Samson represents in the narrative natural strength while the Philistines represent culture. The Samson narrative aims to contrast well-established institutions and wild natural forces. For a display of Samson as a "wild man", see, Mobley 1997.

men, but it is totally ineffective against female power. Under female influence Samson is totally powerless.¹⁷

Samson is chosen before his birth, probably to indicate that God chooses the weakest of all human beings and bestows upon him the most miraculous strength. This illustrates very clearly that all strength is from God, and even a weak and poor human being may turn out to be a biblical superman if it is God's will.

This message is positioned here at the end of the book before the last section that views kingship as the solution to anarchy, and before the Book of Samuel which introduces this new system of leadership. Just before the appearance of this powerful human leadership, the Samson story comes to assert the dependence of all men on God Almighty.

To sup up my claim using the title of this conference: Samson, is a superhuman *hero*, when bestowed upon him the divine miraculous powers, however, take away those divine and unnatural powers, and we are left with an extraordinary weak and *foolish* man.

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¹⁷ On the power relationship between Samson and Delilah, see: Smith 1997.

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THE MANY FACES OF SAMSON

J. Cheryl Exum

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited . . .

Polonius, in *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II

Samson: Hero or Fool? This was the topic of the conference where I first presented the ideas expressed in this essay, and, as soon as I saw this title, I thought, what an interesting dichotomy. I knew at once what my subject would be, for Samson has long struck me as a man with many faces, a man of many facets. Hero or fool? Is it a case of either-or? What about Samson as heroic fool, or foolish hero? Not to mention—as I shall do shortly—other ways of describing Samson as well. ‘Hero or Fool’, I suppose, is a convenient short-hand way of categorizing positive versus negative evaluations of Samson, for Samson is one biblical character who has had his share of both, as the long history of the reception of the Samson narrative reveals. Indeed, David Gunn, in surveying this rich history of interpretation, seems to view ‘buffoon’ or ‘national hero’, broadly speaking, as the major interpretative alternatives (Gunn 2005, 230). Susan Ackerman echoes this same dichotomy when she observes, “‘Heroic’ is hardly the adjective that springs to mind to describe this witless lout’ (Ackerman 2000, 35).

Rather than try to fit Samson in any one category, in what follows I want to consider how multifaceted Samson’s character is, not simply ‘this’ or ‘that’ but ‘this’ and ‘that’ and ‘that as well’, depending on how you look at it. I am not proposing that the faces of Samson I consider here are equally tenable, or that these are the only possibilities, and I would also note that much depends on how one defines one’s categories. What, precisely, do we mean by ‘hero’? What do we mean when we say Samson is a fool? Rather than getting entangled in definitions, I find myself (perhaps unwisely) identifying with Polonius, who, in the play within the play in *Hamlet*, combines genres with abandon: tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited. Similarly I am

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