



Samson and Our Reactions to the Strongman

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But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom? Vast, unwieldy, burdensome,
Proudly secure, yet liable to fall
By weakest subtleties; not made to rule,
But to subserve where wisdom bears command.

— John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, lines 53–57

Lately, I have been contemplating the strongman. He—and I say “he” intentionally, for we have not demonstrated the same attraction to the “strongwoman”—is someone who exudes force and power, sometimes through sheer physical strength, yet often through other qualities such as physical size, demeanor, rhetoric, societal position, etc. He is a “bulldozer” who gets the job done by clearing out any obstacles or opposition in his path. The strongman personality cuts across time and culture. Some love him, some hate him, yet it seems that the strength of our reactions to him corresponds to the strength of his own personality. Few are undecided or dispassionate when it comes to the strongman. What is it about this personality that taps into our deepest fears and desires, and that elicits such strong reactions? As a biblical scholar, I naturally turn to the text in my search for answers.

What are we to make of the figure of Samson? Rollicking good stories, to be sure, but more than vaguely unsettling as a part of the biblical narrative. Mahri Leonard-Fleckman reflects on the construction of Judg 13–16, and reflects on how readers might come to understand the significance of this strongman in the larger context.

In the Bible, the quintessential strongman is Samson in Judg 13–16. From a literary-historical perspective, some of the Samson stories may be as “old as Israel’s origins.”¹ At the core of the Samson saga lie tales of a strongman who lives on the fringes of society; he single-handedly wreaks havoc in the Shephelah,² and reflects little concern for anyone beyond himself. Yet in addition to these core tales, a secondary, more overtly theological theme sews the strongman tales into the book of Judges and the beginning of Samuel. These additions describe the miracle birth of Samson and soften the older portrayal of Samson as one who acts without concern for God or others.

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The literary history of the Samson narrative enhances our understanding of the complexity of the strongman’s character, as well as the tension between Samson the strongman and Samson who acts in accord with the divine. His stories illustrate the strength of our reactions to the strongman, while bringing to the forefront the question of compatibility between the strongman’s actions and the divine will. In the following pages, and working from the text out, my goal is to explore the relationship between the strongman and the narrative depiction of God for what the Samson saga might teach us.

THE TAPESTRY OF THE TEXT

We enter the Samson cycle through the story of Samson’s miraculous birth in Judg 13. An angel appears to Samson’s mother, the unnamed “wife of Manoah.” Ironically, it is the unnamed woman, not Manoah, who is the key figure in the story and the recipient of divine instruction. The angel tells her that she will conceive and bear a son. He is to be a Nazirite, one consecrated to God, from birth. She is to consume no intoxicants or unclean food until his birth, and no razor is to touch his head. Samson (whose name is a play on the word *šemeš*, “sun”) will be a man of faith and a hero; he will serve God and will begin to deliver his people from the Philistines (13:5). This chapter is the most explicitly theological part of the Samson cycle, and it contains a beautiful description of the angel of God, whom Manoah’s wife describes as “most awesome” (13:6), and who refuses Manoah’s request for his name by saying, “Why do you ask my name? It is wondrous” (13:18). When Manoah offers up a burnt offering to YHWH in the presence of the angel, the angel ascends toward heaven in the flame upon the altar, and Manoah and his wife

¹Susan Niditch, *Judges* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 154.

²The Shephelah is the lowland region in the south-central area of Israel stretching to the coastal plain.

fall on their faces in amazement (13:20). Chapter 13 is one of the most mystical descriptions of divine-human interaction in the Hebrew Bible. Like the angel or “man” who struggles with Jacob in Gen 32:29, here the angel eludes the human desire to name and categorize.

Yet chapter 13 is independent from the subsequent Samson lore, and is a brilliant case of “revision through introduction,” in which biblical scribes add material to the front of a story in such a way that shifts the reader’s understanding of what follows.³ The chapter also helps to bridge the end of Judges into 1 Samuel by mirroring the story of Hannah and her miraculous pregnancy in 1 Samuel 1. Many aspects of chapter 13 are entirely unique to the Samson saga and do not appear in the core stories of Judg 14–16. The relationship between Samson and YHWH, and the mystery of the divine, is one such unique aspect. After the miraculous birth account, the narrator describes God’s work “behind the scenes,” as it were, in the beginning or end of each chapter (14:4; 15:18–19; 16:28–30). Such statements are matter-of-fact and serve as reminders of God’s presence, yet this presence is not reflected in the core stories themselves. More prominently, God enters the narrative when the “spirit of YHWH” begins to “stir” in Samson (13:25), or “rushes upon” Samson in his key moments of strength (14:6, 19; 15:14). These descriptions of the divine are distinct from chapter 13, and resemble stories of Saul the warrior in 1 Samuel, in which rage and agitation are symptoms or the result of divine inspiration.⁴

Besides the divine-human relationship, other key details are also isolated to chapter 13. The birth story places Samson within the paradigm of other Judges’ savior figures, who, no matter their personal foibles and messy personalities, will act on behalf of Israel. The text introduces us to Samson’s parents, gives Samson an identity as part of the tribe of Dan in verses 3 and 25, and sets him up to be a Nazirite. These details fall out of the saga after chapter 13, and connections back to such identifying statements will appear only as editorial framing and intrusions. Chapter 13 closes with the birth of Samson, who is blessed with the “spirit of YHWH” as he grows.

Chapters 14 through 16 contain a series of Samson’s exploits that are incompatible with the description of Samson the Nazirite in chapter 13. Chapters 14 and 15 are a self-contained series of tales at the heart of the Samson lore, ending in

³On “revision through introduction,” see Sara J. Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Oxford, 2016). Those who argue for the secondary nature of chapter 13 include J. Cheryl Exum, “The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983) 30–45; idem, “The Many Faces of Samson,” in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, Themes in Biblical Narratives: Jewish and Christian Traditions, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014) 13–32; Yairah Amit, “The Nazirism Motif and the Editorial Work,” in *In Praise of Editing in the Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays in Retrospect* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012) 131–146; and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 43.

⁴Simcha Shalom Brooks compares Saul and Samson, the only two characters in the Bible to experience the spirit of YHWH “rushing” upon them. For Samson, the spirit results in him tearing apart animals and killing people; for Saul, too, the spirit “rushes upon him” in 1 Sam 11 and he cuts up a yoke of oxen (1 Sam 11:6). See Brooks, “Saul and the Samson Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21/71 (1996) 19–25.

verse 15:20 with the statement that Samson “judged” Israel for twenty years. This statement is then repeated secondarily in Judg 16:31 to connect the story of Samson-Delilah to the entire Samson cycle in chapters 13 through 16.⁵ Chapters 14 and 15 demonstrate no awareness that Samson is “set apart” for God in chapter 13, and throughout, Samson blatantly breaks the laws concerning Nazirite vows in Numbers 6:1–21, which prohibit certain food, drink, and proximity to the dead.⁶ In these core tales of chapters 14 and 15, Samson is the strongman and loose cannon *par excellence*. His actions are based in reaction, impulsivity, and revenge. He tears apart a full-grow lion with his bare hands (14:5–6); kills first thirty men (14:19) and then a thousand with an animal’s jawbone (15:15); sets flame to foxes’ tails and lets them loose to torch grain, vineyards, and olive trees (15:4–5); beats people up (15:8); and melts restraining ropes from his arms (15:14). In chapter 15, he puts the men of Judah in danger, or at the very least in an awkward position, when he incurs the wrath of the Philistines by setting fire to their land. The Judahites search him out to bind him and bring him back to the Philistines, asking him, “You knew that the Philistines rule over us; why have you done this to us?” (15:11). Unlike other characters in Judges, Samson never acts as army leader for Judah against an external threat; rather, he puts the people in danger through his impulsive actions.

Samson is equally impulsive when it comes to his sexual appetite, and the Samson lore in chapters 14 and 15, as well as chapter 16, involve a series of encounters with women. From the Timnite woman in chapter 14 who perhaps becomes Samson’s wife, albeit briefly,⁷ to a prostitute in Judg 16:1 and, finally, to the famous Samson-Delilah episode in Judg 16, in which we are told that Samson “loved” (or perhaps lusted) after Delilah (16:4). This final episode may be modeled after the story of Samson’s first woman/wife in Judg 14, for both women “harass” him (the verb in both cases is the same, **רָאַזָּה**, in 14:17 and 16:16) until he divulges the answers to riddles and secrets.

The final tale, the Samson-Delilah episode, reflects awareness of chapter 13 in a single, editorial verse, when Samson tells Delilah that his strength resides in his hair as connected with the Nazirite vows: “He said to her, ‘No razor has ever touched my head, for I have been a nazirite to God since I was in my mother’s womb’” (16:17). Some would contend that Samson’s exceptional strength throughout the entire Samson narrative is then connected to his Nazirite status, based upon this verse in the Samson-Delilah episode.⁸ Yet the Nazirite restrictions

⁵For the clearest explanation of the composite nature of Judg 13–16, see Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, 41–44.

⁶For a discussion of how the Samson lore and Num 6:1–21 diverge, see Yairah Amit, “The Nazirism Motif and the Editorial Work.”

⁷The parameters of the relationship between Samson and this woman are unclear. We know that he intends to “take her” as his “wife” (noting that the Hebrew *’isšah* does not distinguish between “woman” and “wife”), and Judg 14 describes a subsequent feast, perhaps for a wedding or a betrothal. The woman then becomes another man’s “woman,” “or wife” in Judg 14:20. In Judg 15:1, Samson visits her at her father’s home (not the home of another man) and becomes incensed when he learns she was given to someone else.

⁸As one example, see Royce M. Victor, “Delilah—A Forgotten Hero (Judges 16:4–21): A Cross-Cultural

against hair-cutting in Num 6:1–21 follow a completely different logic than the myth-like plot of superhuman strength in one’s hair that runs through chapter sixteen. Rather, verse 17 is an interpretive addition that connects the Samson-Delilah episode back to chapter 13 and is independent from the otherwise repetitive dialogue between Samson and Delilah, in which Delilah asks him three times the secret of his strength, and each time he replies that if a certain action were performed on him, “I would become weak, as any other man” (16:7, 11, 17b).⁹

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The key ingredient to Samson the strongman is his liminality. In the core tales, his identity is vague and elusive. He does not fit into Danite or Philistine society, nor does he conform to the terms *nazir* or judge, the only biblical categories applied to him in the narrative.¹⁰ Unlike the other major figures in Judges, Samson acts alone, and is disconnected from any larger family, tribe, or fighting unit. His affiliation with the tribe of Dan evaporates as we enter the beginning of his exploits in chapter 14, and returns only in 16:31 to package the stories into a single Samson cycle. This later attempt to fit Samson into the tribe of Dan, and pit this group against the Philistines, is opposed to the core tales of Samson the strongman, who cannot be controlled or boxed—he belongs to no party or side, but rather works for himself. We might even define him as Canaanite. Notably, just as Samson inhabits a liminal zone, so do the women with whom he consorts. While the Timnite woman is described as “Philistine” in 14:1, the core lore demonstrates little concern with how to classify her, or the other women with whom Samson associates in the Shephelah.

SAMSON, GOD, AND US

What does the Samson saga and its literary history have to do with us? I have three proposals. First, the stories and the world(s) from which they emerge demonstrate the underdog’s attraction to the strongman. Ancient Israel was surrounded by and often at the mercy of stronger, foreign powers. Samson’s marginality, his ability to remain outside of societal boundaries, and his single-handed ability to crush larger groups defined as the enemy (the Philistines, in this case) reflect the perspective of the underdog. His is a story of resistance, a story of “hope and vindication” for the underdog,¹¹ and a reflection of the problems with

Narrative Reading,” in *Joshua and Judges*, eds. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 235–256.

⁹See Yairah Amit’s convincing argument in “The Nazirism Motif and the Editorial Work.”

¹⁰Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006) 1–2.

¹¹Susan Niditch, “Samson as Cultural Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990) 608–624.

relations between Israelites and non-Israelites. Samson clearly appealed to later editors and redactors of the Bible, who preserved and reshaped his core stories in chapters 14 through 16 to fit within the book of Judges and bridge into the beginning of 1 Samuel.

The strongman incites strong reactions. We see this not only within the text, from the Philistines to the Judahites, but also outside the text, in the history of interpretation of the Samson narrative.

In some sense, Samson is the classic Israelite “trickster,” who works from the bottom to turn the system upside down for his or her benefit, though he has the additional strongman attributes of selfishness, impulsivity, and a bullying nature (on top of his superhuman, myth-like strength). What appealed to the people then, I propose, also appeals to people now, particularly those who are underdogs in some way, whether real or perceived. In a modern context, the strongman exudes immunity from all that might scare us—such as powerlessness, lack of control, uncertainty, change—and from all that constrains us—such as civility, a current system or structure, social responsibility, etc. For those who feel crushed by fear, frustration, or a sense of societal constraint, his is a story of hope and vindication. Yet when left unchecked, his example can also be dangerous, for it can lead to a sense of self-righteousness, the belief that we are perpetual victims, or our own tendency to bully, bulldoze, or disrespect the other.

Second, the strongman incites strong reactions. We see this not only within the text, from the Philistines to the Judahites, but also outside the text, in the history of interpretation of the Samson narrative. According to J. Cheryl Exum, there are more distinct interpretations of Samson than of any other biblical character. Samson is anything from “heroic fool, foolish hero, trickster, tragic wild man, comic bandit, tragicomic-trickster-terrorist, foolish-freedom-fighter-type-of-Israel, fool-for-love-Nazirite-judge, negative example and hero of the faith.”¹² Some would describe Samson as a hero, for his stories contain some of the classic traits of the heroic biography: the special birth and divine paternity, adventures in a foreign land or in nature, superhuman strength, and return to society.¹³ Early interpretations of Samson as hero include the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities* 5.317; as well as the New Testament’s book of Hebrews, where Samson is included as part of the “great cloud of witnesses” of faith, alongside such figures as Abraham and Moses, David and Samuel (Hebrews 11:32–12:1). John Milton, in his *Samson Agonistes*, cited on the first page of this article, both

¹²J. Cheryl Exum, “The Many Faces of Samson,” *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 30.

¹³Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, 12–14.

warns against the tragic ruler who demonstrates strength without wisdom, yet depicts Samson as a redeemed hero by the end of his closet drama.

Others, however, argue quite forcefully that Samson is the antithesis of anything heroic. Royce Victor states that Samson is “exceptionally brutal,” and “there is nothing to glorify his character except his exceptional superhuman strength.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, Lawson Younger argues that the book of Hebrews lists Samson as a hero of faith for homiletic purposes only, based on those individuals with whom the audience would be most familiar. He concludes that Samson is “one of the most narcissistic persons in the Bible. Self-gratification is what drives this man. Never in the Samson narrative does he operate in anyone’s interest but his own.”¹⁵ Such responses demonstrate the remarkable breadth of our reactions to the strongman—he can be anything from hero to brutal narcissist—as well as the force of such reactions. In a modern context, the strength of our reactions to the strongman might have the adverse effect of pitting people against each other, and of perhaps demonizing those who do not hold the same view of his character as we do.

Third, the text teaches us not to make the strongman our god. One of the greatest questions in the Samson narrative is the character of God. Beyond the angel’s statements in chapter 13, the narrator rarely discloses God’s perspective. All we know, based on the current arrangement of the text, is that the core strongman tales are controlled and placed within a theological framework that teaches us that ultimately God is the source of Samson’s strength. Yet even in the narrative’s current form, God seems to condone Samson’s actions when the “spirit of YHWH” rushes upon Samson, or when the narrator claims that God is working behind the scenes when Samson acts in selfish, foolish, or reactive ways. It is only natural, then, to see the actions of Samson reflected in the character of God. Indeed, Exum has noted that if Samson is a trickster, then God is a “divine trickster.” If one accepts both the “creative and destructive” aspects of Samson, she asks, “should one not be prepared to accept the creative and destructive sides of the God he represents?”¹⁶

The final moments of Samson’s life are a good case study for this question. In his death, one could argue that Samson dies a hero, accomplishing the mission set out for him by the angel of YHWH in chapter 13, to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. The Philistines blind, imprison, and humiliate him. They then gather to offer sacrifices to their god Dagon, who has given their “great enemy” into their hands, and they bring Samson out to “entertain” them (16:23–25). Samson then cries out to God to remember him, to give him strength one last time, and pulls down the weight of an entire building on top of him, killing himself and hordes of

¹⁴Victor, “Delilah—A Forgotten Hero,” 243.

¹⁵K. Lawson Younger, *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges, Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 327.

¹⁶J. Cheryl Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52/3 (1990), 410–429, esp. 424.

people. In the last line of the story, he receives a hero's burial when the entire household or clan of his father collects his body and interts him in his father's tomb (16:31). Yet the motivation behind Samson's sacrifice is personal revenge, not care for his people, when he cries out, "Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes" (16:28). Is the God of Israel, then, also a God of revenge?

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In its current form, the text's response to this question is "no." The Samson saga is a story for and about ancient Israel and Israel's God, YHWH. The point is YHWH's protection of Israel, and the power of YHWH above any other god. Although the God of Israel is absent through much of the older, core tales of Samson the strongman in Judg 14–16, and seems to allow and even condone Samson's actions, the text asks us to carry the tension between these older stories and the final, editorial say. Like our contemporary world, it may seem that the strongman, the bully, wins. Yet in the end, the strongman does not have the last word. Samson dies with his goal of revenge, sadly missing the point, while God's power is revealed. Younger proposes that the saga is all about God's grace, and that Samson serves, ironically, as an agent of God's will through the exercise of his own immoral will.¹⁷ If Samson the strongman is at the heart of the Samson saga, then the current form of the saga must point us to the power of God. The reader is invited to trust in this God while also recognizing the complexity of the text.

Ultimately, there is a reason why the Samson stories are placed at the end of the book of Judges, leading into Samuel. From an editorial perspective, the stories are set within the breakdown of society and the judges' decline,¹⁸ the time when there "was no king in Israel" (18:1). It is within this wild, raw, unruly space that Samson's voice can be heard. However, this type of uncontrollable character is also precarious and unstable. His self-focus and reactivity make him incapable of being a true leader and, the text tells us, such a leader cannot survive. Of course, no human leadership lasts forever, yet the strongman remains etched into cultural memory, not because he is good or moral or wise, but because of the remarkable mess he makes.

The Bible's scribes knew that the Samson lore was important to preserve, for the strongman is timeless and his lessons invaluable. Yet ultimately, they knew to preserve those stories within a framework of the fragmentation of society, to warn us about when such a personality might emerge. They also knew to place him

¹⁷Younger, *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges, Ruth*, 328.

¹⁸Niditch, *Judges*, 121.

within a theological framework, to remind us that despite the bullying nature of the strongman, God has the last word. Regardless of Samson's selfishness and God's apparent absence, there is no question of who is stronger. To drive this point home, the scribes brilliantly fronted the entire saga with one of the most beautiful and mystical descriptions of divine-human interaction in chapter 13, in which the angel of YHWH is too wondrous to be named. And this is perhaps where we should end, remembering that despite Samson's force and the strength of our reactions to him, we cannot make him our idol by focusing undue attention on him. It is not the strongman, but God, who is too wondrous to be named. 

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