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Enigma Variations: Aspects of the Samson Story Judges 13-16

Mark Greene

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INTRODUCTION

Pointing towards Leamas, Karden said, in a voice more impressive because it was perfectly under control:

'Smiley wanted to know whether Leamas had told her too much. Leamas had done the one thing British Intelligence had never expected him to do: he had taken a girl and wept on her shoulder.' Then Karden laughed quietly, as if it were all such a neat joke: 'Just as Karl Riembeck did. He's made the same mistake.'

John LeCarrel¹

The Samson story has long fired the Western imagination, inspiring the high art of Milton and Handel and finding more popular expression in a song like Tom Jones' Delilah. The biblical text, too, continues to appeal at different levels. For the philosopher—the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. For children—Samson as a kind of biblical Superman with, like Superman, just one weakness. For adults—the universal theme of man's vulnerability to woman—a theme that finds its contemporary counterparts in fiction like LeCarre's, and indeed in recent events. How startling are the parallels between Samson and Washington's mayor Marion Barry—lured by a beautiful ex-model into a hotel room lavishly appointed with FBI surveillance equipment and, on his third visit, arrested for cocaine use! The timelessness of some of the Samson story's themes and its broad appeal have, however, not led to any consensus or even majority view about its meaning. Is the diversity of opinion an inevitable result of the ambiguities and silences of the text or can a core meaning be discerned?

This essay adopts a literary-linguistic approach to the story broadly dependent on the methods of Alter² and Cotterell and Turner.³ It assumes the literary unity of the book of Judges and its status as a text within an oral culture—as much to be heard as to be read. It also assumes that the original reader's presupposition pool included an overall familiarity with the plot of the story and with Israel's geography, history and religious law. As such it takes the date of final redaction to be within the broad range of most scholarly opinion—eighth century to the early post-exilic period.⁴ Though, obviously, the date does affect the interpretation of the story, particularly in so far as it might have been

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seen as a paradigm for contemporary events, the overall thrust seems unaffected by the precise period of final redaction.

¹ J LeCarre, *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* (The Reprint Society 1964) 207-208.

² R Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London 1981).

³ F P Cotterell & M Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London 1989).

⁴ Cf J A Soggin, *Judges* (London 1981), quoting Richter; R C Bolting, *Judges* (Garden City 1975).

In the analysis of the text, limitations of space make it impossible to deal with all the issues raised, even all the major ones. As such, many! Gordian knots have been rather unceremoniously cut and many issues left undiscussed: eg the textual problem at 14:15-17; the fire motif; the, significance of the number 3; the interpretation of the riddle as key to the whole story; the implications of Samson's life for an understanding of 'judgeship'. Nor is a detailed, 'diagrammatic' discourse analysis presented. Nevertheless, the impact on the story's meaning of the co-text, structure, peaking, and the gamut of stylistic features from; fronting to the control of voice in verbs, is brought out. As such the study has generated some new insights and its focus is on these rather than on noting agreements and differences with other commentators.

The essay begins with a look at the cotext and the interpretative clues it provides and then goes on to examine the story itself. The basic genre is taken as history, whatever roots it may or may not have in saga.⁵ Nevertheless, this is history told, as Alter has shown for other segments, of Judges,⁶ with the narrative techniques of fiction. Indeed, one of the particular joys of this study has been to discover something of how subtle and well-told the story is, and how brilliantly its particular genre matches its themes and meaning.

THE CO-TEXT

Judges as a Book

Historically, the majority of scholars have believed that the book of Judges was composed by a series of redactors. This view has tended to focus scholarly effort on the attempt to discern the contribution of the various redactors, and has often led to an approach that has not viewed, the book as a literary unit with an overall thrust. It has seen chapters 17-19 as appendices⁷ and has not sought to discern the relationships between the individual stories. Whatever the history of the text, this kind of approach fails to take seriously the fact that the material is presented as a unit, and that the text itself supplies some important interpretative keys.

The introductory material of chapters 1 and 2 establishes the historical context. The repetition of material from Joshua reinforces the idea that Judges is a self-contained unit, and focuses the reader on the reasons for its inclusion beyond mere information. Indeed, the material is presented in a way that stresses spiritual fidelity. It sets a benchmark for leadership in Joshua, and a benchmark for obedience in his generation and the generations led by the elders who knew him and what God had done for Israel.⁸ This is immediately contrasted with the disobedience of subsequent generations, the distressing consequences of

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that disobedience, and God's response to that distress—the raising up of judges. The narrator then describes how the same overall pattern is evident in the whole period of the judges: Israel's sin; God's anger; punishment through oppression; Israel's cry to God; God's grace in raising up a saviour.

⁵ J L Crenshaw, *Samson* (London 1977) 19.

⁶ Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 37-41.

⁷ A E Cundall, *Judges* (London 1968) 50.

⁸ Judges 2:7.

This template is reflected in the so-called formula introductions to the individual stories.⁹ Importantly, however, the narrator indicates that what is to occur is not simply a cycle but rather a downward spiral:

'But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them.'¹⁰

Consequently, the reader is encouraged to recognize not only the fact of sin in every generation, but to consider the evidence for spiritual decline, and God's character and actions in the light of that decline. A decline that manifests itself in a number of ways:

1 *Decline in the character of the leaders* from Joshua and Othniel to Barak's lack of courage, to the flaws in Gideon's character that lead to Israelite idolatry¹¹ and the slaughter of his sons, to Jephthah's self-interestedness, to Samson's intermarriage, to a vacuum in leadership.

2 *Decline in national unity* from complete unity under Joshua and in the national consultation of God in Judges 1:1, to the failure of 4 tribes to answer Deborah's call, to the inter-tribal war between Ephraim and the Gileadites, to the failure of Judah, the lead tribe, to defend Samson, to the extreme tribalism of Benjamin, to the individualism that ends the book. This decline is emphasised by the comparison between the dismissal of the nation by Joshua (2:6-7) and the dismissal at the end of the book (21:24-25). In the first, a leader dismisses the nation, there is a sense of national unity and the people 'served the Lord'. In the second, there is no leader, the people simply leave, and there is an emphasis on tribe and clan as opposed to nation, and an emphasis on individualism as opposed to serving the Lord.

3 *Decline in national spirituality* from the general and repeated idolatry of the people to the compromised standards of even the priesthood,¹² to the unprecedented horror of gang rape.¹³

This overall decline is matched by a decline in God's apparent readiness to intervene for Israel. In the Deborah narrative, the cry for help¹⁴ is immediately followed by the introduction of Deborah and the divine prediction of victory. In the Gideon narrative, God's initial response to the nation's cry is to send a prophet whose message is a confirmation of sin and contains no element of predicted rescue.¹⁵ In the Jephthah narrative, God initially refuses to rescue his people.¹⁶

In sum, the reader approaching the Samson narrative is intended to look for signs of spiritual decline and for changes in God's attitude to rescuing his people.

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Additionally, there are a significant number of thematic links between the Samson story and prior stories. The important point here is to note that the reader, *before* coming to chapters 13-

⁹ Judges 3:7-9, 3:12-16,4:1-3.

¹⁰ Judges 2:19.

¹¹ Judges 8:27.

¹² Judges 17:5-12.

¹³ Judges 19:30.

¹⁴ Judges 2:3.

¹⁵ Judges 6:7-10.

¹⁶ Judges 10:13.

16, has already been attuned to making links between stories, beyond the observation of the sin-cry-rescue pattern: eg deception—Ehud/Eglon, Jael/Sisera;¹⁷ ridicule of enemies—Eglon's courtiers, Sisera's mother;¹⁸ the importance of women—Achshah,¹⁹ Deborah, Jael; unusual weaponry—Shamgar, Ehud, Jael, Gideon;²⁰ promise-Gideon's conditional promises to God, Jephthah's vow²¹; the coming of the spirit of the Lord.²² These links encourage the reader to cross-compare the events and characters in each story. The results of such a comparison are, however, left to the reader. This authorial restraint suggests that this kind of historical narrative is intended to be read not just as historical record, not just as 'fictionalised history' but as a kind of *mashal*, in which the hearer/reader is expected to mull over the implications of contrasts and comparisons himself. Inter-story comparisons apart, authorial restraint similarly applies to the overall depiction of characters and the overall meaning of individual stories where interpretation is usually shaped by style rather than by explicit statement.

In conclusion, the contemporary reader would probably have come to the Samson story, aware of the overall plot, expecting spiritual decline and a change in God's response, looking for links with previous stories and seeking stylistic clues to character and overall meaning.

OVERTURE

Chapter 13—Great Expectations

Overall Structure:

<i>Episode</i>	<i>Verse</i>	<i>Marker</i>	<i>Title</i>
Introduction	1-2		2 Problems
1	3-5	Change of players	Annunciation
2	6-7	Change of location/ players	The Wife's Report
3	8-23	Change of location/ players	The Angel's Return
Wrap	24-25		

Introduction—Two Problems—13:1-2

The opening of the Samson narrative is marked by the introductory formula used in all the accounts of the 'major' judges, recording Israelite sin and God's response. This interaction with the cotext raises the expectation of a repetition of the rest of the pattern: oppression; cry for deliverance; raising up of a leader. The first two components of the

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pattern are missing. There is no description of oppression and there is no cry for deliverance. This suggests that the Philistines' regime is relatively benevolent and that the Israelites have

¹⁷ Judges 3:19-21, 4:18-21 respectively.

¹⁸ Judges 3:24, 5:28-30 respectively.

¹⁹ Judges 1:19.

²⁰ Judges 3:16, 3:21, 3:31, 7:16.

²¹ Judges 6:17 & 36-40, 11:30.

²² Judges 3:10, 11:29.

lost a sense of national destiny—far from seeking to possess the whole land they are content to remain under the rule of a nation new to the region.

This absence of national cry for deliverance is then mirrored by the absence of any recorded individual cry for deliverance from the shame of barrenness²³ by either Manoah or his wife. This is a marked and surprising departure from the pattern of other accounts of barren women—Sarah,²⁴ Rebecca,²⁵ Rachel²⁶—in which God is shown responding to the yearning or prayer of either the woman or her husband. The absence of 'cry' at the individual and national level not only suggests a parallel between the two and draws attention to the extraordinary grace of Yahweh who intervenes, unbidden, to save his people, but also establishes the expectation that the solution to both problems will be related.

Manoah and his Wife—Characterisation

The narrator's introduction of Manoah serves two purposes. First, information. It locates the narrative on the edge of Philistine territory—thus creating suspense. Second, the large number of details about Manoah—he is given location, tribe, name and marital status—contrasts with the anonymity of his wife. This suggests to the reader that Manoah will be more significant in the story—a judgement which is to be challenged by the events and characterisation of the rest of the chapter. It is to the woman that the angel first appears and even after Manoah has prayed that the man of God would come to us (*'elenu*)²⁷ he reappears to the woman on her own. Manoah follows his wife, is given no new information and no special instructions for the child's upbringing. Rather, he is forcefully told that the original instructions to his wife are sufficient. If Manoah, then, is depicted as secondary to his wife in terms of role he is also shown to have less spiritual insight and less understanding of God. His wife rightly describes the angel's appearance, even if not relating it to identity. She is so awed—the appropriate response perhaps—that she can ask no questions. She runs to fetch her husband when the angels appears the second time. By contrast, Manoah's response is cool—he merely gets up and walks (*wayyelek*). Manoah does not lack faith in God—he accepts the promise—but he is not overawed—he has the presence of mind to ask the question about the man's name that his wife feels she should have.²⁸ Manoah, however, is humbled at every stage. His wife proves right about the man's identity, his inquiry into the man's name is not only unanswered but shown to be irrelevant: 'Why do you ask my name? Since it is wonderful' (*pel'i*)²⁹, and though God does appear to him in response to

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prayer he does not respond to the request to show them how to bring up the boy. Furthermore, Manoah's offer of hospitality is refused—something of a slight in contemporary culture. God is responsive but not precisely in Manoah's terms: he is God who remains unmanipulatable. Finally, Manoah believes that he will die because he has seen God. A belief that his wife emphatically demonstrates as absurd with not one, not two, but with three reasons.

²³ Note how the barrenness theme is highlighted by contrast with the prolific fertility of Abdon and Ibzan in 12:8-15, the section immediately prior.

²⁴ Gen 15:3.

²⁵ Gen 25:21.

²⁶ Gen 30:1.

²⁷ Judges 13:8.

²⁸ Judges 13:6.

²⁹ NIV margin.

The characterisation of Manoah's wife as wise continues the motif of powerful women already noted³⁰ and forms a base for comparison with the other women in the story—the loyal Israelite wife, taking the issues to her husband and spiritually attuned to God's character.

Episode 1—Annunciation 13:3-5

The angel's startling announcement to Manoah's wife is divided into three distinct parts, not only grammatically by the use of punctuation but also by the use of adverbs, enclitics and the declarative *hinneh*: v3, behold (*hinnehnah*—absent in NIV); v4, and now see to it (*weattah hishamrinah*); v5 behold you (*hinnak*). The solemnity is further increased by the use of imperatives and the pithy correspondence of form between the expression of Manoah's wife's problem and its solution:

<i>'at 'akarah welo yaldah</i>	(you are sterile and childless)
<i>weharit weyaladt ben</i>	(you will conceive and will have a son)

and by the way the announcement builds to a climax by reserving the most important information for the last: the woman is already pregnant (*hinnak harah*—behold you are pregnant, not as NIV), the prohibition against using the razor and the revelation of the child's role.

A number of points arise. First, there is the extraordinary announcement that the child will be bound to a pre-natal Nazirite vow. This is unprecedented in the canon and in any event would be highly unusual, since the Nazirite vow was a voluntary commitment. The core of the vow is separation, mentioned nine times in Numbers 6:1-21. Throughout this separation the Nazirite is consecrated to the Lord. This firmly locates the child's entire life within the framework of covenant holiness. As it says in Numbers, the Nazirite must be 'holy until the period of his separation to the Lord is over.'³¹

Second, the narrator does not mention the other requirements involved in the Nazirite vow—the abstention from wine and strong drink, the avoidance of contact with dead bodies, and the defilement that occurs if someone dies suddenly in the Nazirite's presence.³² This is particularly surprising since his mother is given such specific instructions concerning wine, strong drink and unclean food. This only serves to

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highlight the omission. At this point the reader is presumably to assume that the other elements apply, but that there is some particular reason for mentioning the razor. Indeed this is to be the case.

Third, the introduction of the vow inevitably reminds the reader of both Gideon and Jephthah, heightening anticipation that significant action will revolve round the vow, and highlighting, by comparison, its distinctiveness. Gideon's promises and Jephthah's vows reveal character,

³⁰ Cf Cotext section above.

³¹ Num 6:5b.

³² Num 6:9.

and anticipate action. Samson's vow also anticipates action, but it does not so much reveal character as create expectations of character.

Fourth, the child will only *begin*³³ to effect the salvation of Israel from the Philistines. This inevitably takes the reader's mind forward to the figure who completes the task, ie David.³⁴ This in turn sets up another criterion of internal commentary—the comparison of Samson with figures that follow him—Samuel, Saul, David—a comparison we will not pursue here, but which is invited by the subsequent text.³⁵

Fifth, the positioning of Philistines (*pelistim*) at the end of the announcement emphasizes that God's focus is on national, not tribal, nor mere individual deliverance.

Finally, although the appearance of the angel, the sacrifice, and the presence of fire, raise a comparison with the Gideon story,³⁶ the angel's appearance to a couple, the wife's barrenness, and the promise of a son, combine to distinguish this theophany from the one in the Gideon narrative, and to establish a parallel with Abraham and Sarah, where the appearance of the angel of the Lord, a woman's barrenness, the promise of a son, offering and fire, are also elements. Manoah and his wife are then presented as types of the patriarchal pair and, like Isaac, the birth of their son has national as well as personal significance.

Episode 2: The Wife's Report—13:6-7

Manoah's wife's report of the incident differs in both style and content from the narrator's. First, she records the awe-inspiring nature of the encounter and its disorienting impact on her. Second, in a more straight forward style she reduces the angel's three sentences to one, omitting the reference to the child's national role, and adding the phrase 'until the day of his death'. The omission can perhaps be explained at the psychological level by her intense excitement over her pregnancy. Mary responds similarly in Luke's account of the annunciation.³⁷ Faced by a stream of information about the national and international significance of her son she can initially only deal with the first, personal detail—'you will... give birth to a son'—and therefore simply says, 'how will this be, since I am still a virgin?' Psychology apart, it is perhaps not insignificant that the very thing that Samson seems to be unaware of is precisely any sense of national, as opposed to merely private, role

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against the Philistines. In any event the focus on the child's private, familial significance in this episode contrasts with the previous episode where it was his national significance which we saw highlighted.

The addition of the phrase 'until the day of his death' is similarly enigmatic. At one level, it can be understood to be implicit in the phrase 'from the womb' (*min habbeten*) but then why add it? For the contemporary reader, who knows how Samson will die, it casts a shadow of foreboding over otherwise utterly positive news and it also raises the question as to whether Samson was a Nazirite until the day of his death. Was the mother merely over-exuberant in

³³ Judges. 13:5.

³⁴ 2 Sam 8:1.

³⁵ 1 Sam 1:11; 1 Sam 17:34-36.

³⁶ Judges 6:11-24.

³⁷ Luke 1:28-34.

adding the detail or was she right? Or is the angel's version ultimately more accurate, though ambiguous here? At this stage, it is only important to note the ambiguity and the consequent uncertainty in the reader's mind.

Episode 3: The Return of the Angel—13:8-23

Many issues in this episode have already been dealt with. Here we shall concentrate on the angel's instructions to Manoah and the implications of the relationship of this episode with the preceding material.

First, the angel does not answer Manoah's question about the boy's future '*mispat*' (rule, Hebrew root *sft*)—a word that, in the context of a series of Israelite '*softim*' (judges, Hebrew root *sft*), perhaps represents Manoah's own sense of the boy's role. A sense that proves correct. The angel, however, will not be drawn and reiterates the instructions given to Manoah's wife in a highly emphatic manner:

- the call to overall obedience to the instructions in v13 is followed by a repetition of the specifics in v14;
- both sentences are parallel in form, beginning, unusually with a relative clause '*mikol asher*' (from all that) and ending with the verb;
- tishmor* (you will keep) is emphatically positioned at the end in both sentences;
- the use of *tsavah* (command);
- the fourfold repetition of '*kol*' (all) stresses that no element can be ignored.

These stylistic elements serve to underline the seriousness of the call to obedience, a seriousness further reflected by the fact that the narrator has chosen to repeat these instructions three times in the chapter.³⁸ Obedience, then, is one of the major themes of the chapter, anticipating its pivotal role in the overall narrative. Further, the specific categories emphasized—abstention from strong drink and ritual uncleanness—are precisely those aspects of the Nazirite vow which are to come into focus in Samson's encounter with the Tirmite.³⁹ The narrator, then, is raising the reader's awareness in anticipation of future events.

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Who Goes There? The Source of Suspense in Chapter 13

Though it looks forward, chapter 13 has its own dramatic tension which is generated by the movement towards the moment when Manoah and his wife rightly identify the man of God. The problem is established by the fact that Manoah's wife highlights her failure to ask the man his name. A critical point, since it generates in the reader the expectation of a definitive revelation. Interestingly, the narrator suggests that the couple's appreciation of the angel's supernatural identity steadily declines. At the beginning of the story Manoah's wife describes the visitor as 'a man of God... his appearance like an angel of God.'

³⁸ Judges 13:4, 7, 14.

³⁹ Judges 14:8, 10.

Manoah, however, in his prayer simply refers to the man as 'a man of God.' When the angel returns, Manoah's wife describes him as 'a man' (*'ish*). And it is with this word that Manoah also then addresses him. Finally, his ignorance is emphasised by the narrator's comment in v16—Manoah did not realise that it was the angel of the Lord. Indeed, the angel himself seems to obstruct the process, not responding directly to questions, but nevertheless providing clues apparent to the reader but not to Manoah and his wife: eg the description of his name as marvellous (*pel'i*).⁴⁰ In the end it is neither their own insight nor their questions which reveal the identity of the visitor, but an extraordinary display—he did a marvellous thing (*mapli'la'asot*)—that confirms the appropriateness of the angel's description of his name. After this the couple know whom they have seen. As such, the theophany is not just extraordinary in itself, but is the event to which the section has been moving, since this is the event which resolves the dramatic tension of uncertain identification and therefore confirms the promise.

The centrality of the issue of identification is also reflected in the frequency of the root *r'h* (see)—nine times in this chapter.⁴¹ In Alter's terms, this is the *leitwort*⁴² and it is the theme of 'right seeing' which is at the centre of the drama in this chapter and indeed, as we shall see, in the rest of the story.⁴³ In this episode, what finally is seen, importantly in response to worship, is God. The peak of the section, then, is not the promise of a son, or national deliverance, but the appearance of God, before whom men fall to the ground. Once again an emphasis on holiness.

The Wrap 13:24-25

The last two verses of the chapter record the fulfilment of part of the angel's prediction—the boy is born. His name, however, is enigmatic, and its significance much debated. Despite Webb's⁴⁴ suggestion that it is an echo from Deborah's song—But may they who love you be like the sun (*semes*), when it rises in its strength⁴⁵—its reference to the sun seems more pagan in orientation than Yahwistic. Again perhaps building a sense of foreboding.

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The other information in the verses works to build suspense and expectations. First, the boy is grown and therefore ready for action. Second, the spirit of the Lord which has led to decisive action in previous stories has begun to work on Samson. Third, the reader is reminded of Samson's location on the borders of Philistine territory. Fourth, the Lord blesses the boy, suggesting divine approval and reinforcing the expectation of godly character, inherent in the Nazarite vow.

Importantly, it is not special parental education (v8) that primes Samson for action, but God. It is God, then, who, throughout the chapter, is shown to be the initiator.

⁴⁰ Judges 13:17.

⁴¹ Judges 13:3, 6, 10, 20, 21, 22, 23.

⁴² Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 95.

⁴³ Webb, *Judges*, 173, believes that the motif of knowing—*yd'*—is central, based on six occurrences in the entire narrative. *R'h* (see) occurs 18 times. However, quite apart from this numerical superiority, the theme of seeing ties in to all the major events of the plot and is critical to an understanding of Samson, whose weakness is wrong seeing, not wrong knowing. See 'Conclusions' below.

⁴⁴ Webb, *Judges*, 164-165.

⁴⁵ Judges 5:31.

Summary

Chapter 13 sets the stage for divinely initiated confrontation with the Philistines. It introduces the theme of right seeing and emphasizes the divine call to obedience to a lifelong vow, inevitably creating suspense as to its adherence. It presents Samson not just as a child of promise but within a patriarchal and covenantal frame of reference—Samson, in his miraculous conception and his call to holiness, representing a new beginning for Israel. Great expectations. These great expectations, however, are subordinated to the portrait of a God who is depicted as unmanipulatable but gracious to individual and nation, responsive to prayer, and taking the initiative to bless and to reveal himself.

1ST MOVEMENT

Engagement with the Philistines 14:1-15:20

The events relating to Samson's engagement to the Timnite woman occupy two chapters and are bounded by a formula closure—Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

Overall structure:

Episode	Verse	Marker	Title
Phase 1—Three Trips to Timnah			
1	1-4	Change in location	First Sight
2	5-7	Change in location	The Lion at Timnah
3	8-20	Change in location (v8 & v20)	The Wedding
The Wrap?	21	Narrator's comment	
Phase 2—Three Attacks and Four Victories			
4	15:1-8	Time indicator/ change in location	Return to Timnah
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Episode	Verse	Marker	Title
5	9-13	Change in location/ players	Judah's Betrayal
6	14-19	Change in location/ players	2 Victories
Formula Close	20		

This structure reveals a preponderance of spatial as opposed to temporal indicators of change of episode—the narrator heightening suspense by creating the sense of events occurring in quick succession.

Phase 1—Three Trips to Timnah

First Sight 14:1

Samson's descent to Timnah—*yarad* (went down)—is both topographical—Timnah is at a lower altitude than Eshtaol—and symbolic, since it is a descent into Philistine territory and a descent into the desire for intermarriage with a Philistine woman. The use of the term *'ishah* (woman) and her lack of name serve to contrast her with Manoah's unnamed *'ishah* (woman/wife)—the forbidden Philistine vs the ideal Israelite. Samson's intention is a startling shattering of the expectation of holiness developed in chapter 13. How can it be that a Nazirite, and a divinely stirred Nazirite at that, could consider intermarriage and enter into precisely that sin that the people as a whole had consistently committed during the Judges period?⁴⁶ Unexpectedly, the national sin finds expression in the very man designated to relieve the nation of the consequences of that sin. Samson presented as a type of the people.

Nevertheless, Samson follows contemporary convention and asks his parents to arrange the marriage. They object on covenantal grounds—the Philistines are uncircumcised—and they make it clear that the responsibility for such an action rests with him—must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife? Samson's response to his father is a peremptory imperative—get her for me—and, within a culture where fathers were to be obeyed, highly disrespectful. This parent-child dynamic is highlighted by the fact that the narrator no longer refers to Manoah by his name, nor to his wife by her status as wife, but by designators of parental role—father and mother. Samson, in his decline from the standards of his father, again corresponds to the pattern of the people's inter-generational decline, recorded at 2:17. Samson, however, will not be denied and makes it clear that it is not just marriage that he desires but marriage to this particular woman: this one get for me (*'otah qah li*). The pronoun is fronted for emphasis. Samson, far from judging the appropriateness of the Philistine woman according to covenant law, bases his decision entirely on the evidence of his own eyes, continuing

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the motif of seeing from chapter 13 and indeed 14:1-2, and contrasting with the measure of right and wrong which opens the narrative—the people did evil *in the eyes of the Lord*.⁴⁷ Indeed, the true nature of the Timnite, like the angel of the Lord in chapter 13 and Delilah in 16, will not turn out to be what the principal players initially see it to be.

Startlingly, the episode ends with the narrator's comment that this situation has been engineered by God whose motive is anti-Philistine. Nevertheless, God's apparent decision to lead Samson into sin, in order to save the nation, presents significant theological problems for the modern reader. The narrator, however, makes no comment. The same restraint applies to the narrator of 2 Samuel 24 where David is led by God to take a census, and then punished for doing so. The issue of the relationship between divine sovereignty, human responsibility and punishment, was either not a significant issue for the contemporary reader, or one that the narrator chose to let him ponder. Narrative as '*marshal*'.

The Lion at Timnah 14:5-7

⁴⁶ Judges 3:6.

⁴⁷ Judges 13:1-2.

Samson and his parents go down (*yarad*) to Timnah and approach the vineyards—a detail that reminds the reader of the injunction against wine in the Nazirite vow. Samson is attacked by a lion. Far from being some symbolic warning against the impending marriage, the attack becomes the occasion for the spirit to come on Samson, revealing the particular way in which the spirit is to operate in his life—through physical strength. Nevertheless, the reader is left confused—does the timing of the divine gift constitute approval of the marriage? Is there no penalty for such sin?

One other detail is to prove important in the subsequent narrative—Samson's secretiveness in not telling his parents about the incident. Again, the reader is left to ponder why the information has been given, and this creates suspense.

The overall result of the visit to Timnah is that the woman is again seen to be 'good in his eyes', emphasizing Samson's wilful individualism and sinful rebellion against God.

The Wedding 14:8-10

Samson's return to Timnah is marked by three sinful acts. One: contact with the carcass of the lion would be a breach of the Nazirite vow, if it was applied at that time to the carcasses of unclean animals. Two: he ate honey that was ritually unclean. Three: he defiled his parents by giving them unclean food.

Samson's father goes to the woman, presumably to conclude the marriage negotiations, and Samson throws a party. This is described in a way that suggests that he breaks another component of the Nazirite vow. The choice of the word *misteh* (NIV: feast) emphasizes through its root *sth* (drink) the drinking component of a feast. Furthermore, the

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onomatopoeia of the 'sh' and 's' sounds may perhaps suggest drunkenness—*waya'as sham shimshon mishteh* (and Samson made a feast there). In addition, the phrase 'as was customary for bridegrooms' suggests that Samson's behaviour was the same as any other man's—an indictment in itself against someone whose behaviour as a Nazirite was meant to have been different, and even more so in a context where any other man would have had strong drink.

The Challenge 14:11-19a

Samson's decision to set a riddle for his groomsmen seems antagonistic to the point of irrationality, particularly since the riddle is insoluble by wit, and the stakes are so high—an individual would probably have only had one such set of clothing. Antagonism aside, the seriousness with which the challenge is offered and accepted is brought out by the formality of the style: Samson's use of *n'a*; Samson and the Philistines' parallel use of *hwd* (riddle) in both verbal and noun forms; the emphatic use of the infinitive absolute *hagged taggidu* (tell, v12).

Samson, then, is presented not just as a strong man but as a man with an ability with words. This is also established by the neat paradoxes of the riddle and the matching in form of the two halves:

meha'okel yatsah ma'akal
ume'az yatsah matok

(Out of the eater, something to eat;
out of the strong, something sweet.)

The impossibility of finding a solution leads the groomsmen to manipulate Samson's wife into betraying him. Here, the narrator generates suspense by delaying the peak of the incident—the blackmail, the woman's crying, the resort to nagging, and finally Samson's capitulation on the very last day. Within this process, Samson only defends his silence once, and that on grounds which he assumes his wife will appreciate, ie that he owes his parents first allegiance, and that not telling them justifies not telling her.⁴⁸ The reader, however, already knows that Samson's commitment to his parents is less than wholehearted—he has gone against their wishes by marrying the Timnite, and has shown them disrespect by giving them contaminated honey. As such, the narrator generates suspense by giving the reader reason to suppose that Samson will give in, and reason to suppose that he will not. Ambiguity.

Importantly, Samson's comment centres the decision to reveal the riddle round the issue of *allegiance*. This is reinforced by the woman's mention of 'my people' (*bene 'ammi*) and underlined by the narrator's description of 'her people' (*bene 'ammah*). In the event, the Timnite maintains both her national and parental allegiance, whereas Samson fails in both. He espouses the primacy of allegiance to parents, but does not do it. Ironically, she adheres to his principles.

Once known, the Philistines reveal the solution to Samson's riddle in a riddle of their own, like Samson's, in two balancing halves:

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<i>mah matok midevas</i>	(What is sweeter than honey?)
<i>ume'az me'ari</i>	What is stronger than a lion?)

suggesting an agility with language of their own. The riddle is posed in the form of a question, and, ironically, has an answer which the Philistines are either unaware of, or do not fully appreciate—what is stronger than a lion? Answer: the man who killed the lion—Samson. This anticipates the violence of verse 19.

Samson's response to the Philistine riddle is to use a metaphor that reveals his knowledge of their source of information, and his deep disgust with them and his wife. Nevertheless, Samson, in angry mockery of honour, keeps his side of the bet but does so by slaughtering thirty men in Ashkelon. Samson's action is daring—Ashkelon is on the coast and deep in Philistine territory—but also seems an impulsive, irrational overreaction to the incident. This irrationality, however, is apparently counterbalanced, indeed legitimised, by the fact that it is presented as a response to the spirit of the Lord.

The Wrap—The End of the Affair? 19b-20

These verses seem to mark the end of the incident and to resolve several of the problems that have been posed for the reader. The marriage is not consummated, keeping the Nazirite from one sin; Samson's wife is given to another man, removing the possibility of marriage to Samson; 30 Philistines are killed, satisfying the need for some action against them; Samson goes up (*ya'al*) to his father's house, reflecting a symbolic return to allegiance to Israel.

Once again, however, the reader's expectations are quickly shattered.

⁴⁸ Here we see the plot reason for Samson's earlier secrecy at 14:7.

Phase 2—Three Attacks and Four Victories

Return to Timnah 15:1-8

The details of verse 1 reveal the narrator's mastery of allusion. One: 'At the time of corn harvest' (*getsir-hittim*) communicates the season and the passage of time since the slaughter in Ashkelon but, in its implication of dryness, anticipates the fire of verse 5. As in a detective story, the reader either ponders the detail at the time or notes it in retrospect. Two: both the narrator and Samson use possessive suffixes to communicate Samson's right to the woman—respectively, *'ishto* (his wife/woman) and *'ishti* (my wife/woman). This creates the anticipation of confrontation. Three: the young goat (*gedi 'izzim*) may either be a mollifying gift or, with Cundall,⁴⁹ the kind of gift expected in marriage where the bride continued to live with her father. In either case, Samson's use of a kid to express his devotion to a Philistine woman is an ironic counterpoint with his father's use of a kid (*gedi 'izzim*, 13:18) to express his devotion to God. Four: the direct style in which the data of

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Samson's journey, his intentions, and their outcome, are communicated contrast markedly with his father-in-law's highly formal explanation in verse 2, with its double use of infinitive absolutes. Here the device serves to communicate either his sincerity, or the seriousness with which he views the situation he finds himself in.

The offer of the younger sister (v2) might have been construed as a good deal within that culture—the younger presumably having more child-bearing years left. It is, however, also an insult to Samson's first wife and to his initial choice of her. Furthermore, it overlooks the particularity of Samson's attachment, established in 14:3.

Samson's response to his father-in-law's insult and his materialistic view of marriage is to wreak heavy *material* damage on the Philistines, destroying not just the perennial corn crop but the much more valuable, slow-growing olive trees. Interestingly, as in the slaughter at Ashkelon, Samson's revenge does not seem to be directed against those who have caused the offence but, in this instance, against Philistine agriculture in general. Again, there is an element of illogicality in this, as indeed there is in the sheer extent of the damage caused. Samson's acts of revenge may have a connection with the original offence, but in each instance they represent a considerable escalation. This is also the case in his second attack in revenge for the murder of his wife and father-in-law. Here the strict application of the *lex talionis* would have required a life for a life, but certainly not the massacre suggested by the text. Samson acts, then, in a way that seems bound to generate further Philistine response. He, however, fails to foresee this and to consider that his arson might affect his family. The logic of the Philistines' action is surely not only that their fellow-countryman's mistake precipitated the arson, but that Samson is his son-in-law,⁵⁰ that he is therefore part of Samson's family and implicated in the crime. Similarly, later, Samson naively believes that he can unilaterally call a halt to the momentum of revenge.⁵¹ He may stop but there is no good reason why the dominant nation should countenance such slaughter. Indeed, though Samson's retirement to Etam seems to end the incident, the Philistines are shown as immediately seeking Samson's extradition, precisely in terms of the *lex talionis*:⁵² 'to do to him as he did to us'.

⁴⁹ Cundall, *Judges*, 168.

⁵⁰ Judges 15:6.

⁵¹ Judges 15:7.

⁵² Judges 15:10.

Judah's Betrayal-15:9-13

The Philistines' move against Judah reveals another component of Samson's political blindness. For Samson fails not only to see himself as a man connected to a family, but as a man connected to a nation. For the tribe of Judah, Samson's retirement into their territory at Etam is politically naive:⁵³ 'Don't you know that the Philistines are rulers over us?' It is also inconsiderate towards them: 'What have you done to us?'

Indeed, Judah's complete subservience to the Philistines is reinforced

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by the parallels between the Philistines' statement of intent to Judah (vi0b) and Judah's to Samson (v12a):

wayy'omru le'esor et-shimshon 'alinu
wayy'omru to le'esorka yaradnu
(and they said, 'to bind Samson we have come up')
(and they said to him, 'to bind you we have come down')

Here note: the unusual fronting of *le'esor* (to bind) in both sentences; the parallel form of both sentences; the fact that Samson is the direct object in both sentences; the suggestive contrast between Philistine ascent (aggression) and Judah's descent (submission, decline).

This picture of submission is further highlighted by the mention of Samson being bound with 'new ropes', not only anticipating the strength it will take to break them and the later Delilah incident,⁵⁴ but suggesting that the men of Judah themselves were not taking any chances that Samson might escape. Similarly, their promise not to kill him is a sad commentary on the decline of the tribe that was the lead tribe under Moses and the tribe that, at the beginning of the book, led the Israelite advance into Canaan.⁵⁵ Surely an Israelite should not have to seek a promise from fellow Israelites that they will not kill him? In the context of such betrayal, the solemn tone of their pledge, evoked by the use of infinitive absolutes, (v13) is highly ironic. Indeed, this negative portrait of Judah, David's tribe, substantially rocks Brettler's theory that the book of Judges is mere propaganda for the Davidic kingship.⁵⁶

The Third Victory—15:14-18

In the denouement of the incident, Philistine triumph is quickly reversed. The ropes, though new, are easily broken and Samson, picking up a donkey's jawbone—a fresh one we are told and so not too brittle for the job—despatches a thousand Philistines. His delight in his triumph is expressed not only in the facts of the incident—1000 killed—but in the joy of the pun:

belehi hahamor hamor hamoratayim
(With a donkey's jaw bone I have made donkeys of them.)

⁵³ Judges 15:11.

⁵⁴ Judges 16:12.

⁵⁵ Judges 1:14.

⁵⁶ Cf M Brettler, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol 108, no 3, 395-418. Fall 1989.

picking up on the ridicule motif⁵⁷ already seen in the book. Similarly, his unusual weapon is consistent with the motif of unconventional weaponry,⁵⁸ serving perhaps to reinforce the proposition that the Philistines' monopoly on iron posed no obstacle to the purposes of Yahweh.

Importantly, Samson, unlike all the previous major judges, acts on his own without support from family, tribe or nation. This individualism contrasts with the unity of the nation at the beginning of the book, and indeed the unity of the Philistines, not only at this point but in the later Delilah incident. It also serves to highlight his extraordinary strength.

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Invincibility under Threat—The Fourth Victory—15:18-19

This picture of Samson's supernatural invincibility is immediately contrasted with the reality of his human fragility in the face of thirst—an enemy that cannot be combatted by physical strength. Samson's response is to pray.

In this prayer Samson is presented as a model Israelite, giving God the credit for the victory at Ramat Lehi—and emphatically so by the use of the personal pronoun 'you'—describing himself as a servant of the Lord and shuddering at the shameful prospect of falling into the hands of those outside the covenant. Like his mother,⁵⁹ Samson understands that God's blessing is not an antecedent to punishment, and that he has not performed such a great deed through him to let him then die of thirst. This faith, following a great victory and in the face of terminal thirst, contrasts with the murmuring of the wilderness generation in the same circumstances.⁶⁰ Samson is presented as a new Israel, faithful precisely where they were not. The Exodus parallel is continued as God, as he did for Moses, provides water from the rock. Samson's response is similarly reminiscent of Moses⁶¹ and the patriarchs, naming the place in commemoration of the incident.

The impact of the incident at En-haqqore is threefold. One: it re-establishes Samson's typological identification with Israel, serving to suggest that the prenatal Nazirite vow is a 'type' of God's choice of Israel—Samson, like the nation, chosen by God to be holy. Two: it shifts the focus off Samson's deeds and onto God's—explicitly acknowledging his provision at Ramat Lehi and recording his miraculous provision of water at En-haqqore. Three: it shifts the focus away from Samson's conflict with the Philistines and onto his one-to-one relationship with God.

As such, the recording of Samson's elevation to judgeship at this point suggests that it had at least as much to do with the faith and dependence on God which he had demonstrated, as with his great feats of strength.

Summary—Chapter 14 & 15—Decline and Rise

Whereas this section began with the prospect of Samson's apostasy, it ends with an entirely positive picture of a Samson apparently reformed in line with the expectations of chapter 13—victorious over the Philistines, dependent in prayer, acknowledging the covenant,

⁵⁷ Cf Cotext section above.

⁵⁸ Cf Cotext section above.

⁵⁹ Judges 13:23.

⁶⁰ Ex 17:1-7.

⁶¹ Ex 17:6.

showing greater faith than Israel in the Wilderness and imitating Mosaic/patriarchal naming patterns—fit to be a judge in Israel. Indeed, the use of the formula close, whilst not actually marking the end of the story, underlines this positive picture of Samson—as if this were the last word. Important, too, is the fact that, as at the end of chapter 13, the reader is left with a picture of representatives of God's people, acknowledging his greatness after a definitive act of his self-revelation in response to worship/prayer.

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SECOND MOVEMENT

Chapter 16—Decline and Fall

Overall structure:

<i>Episode</i>	<i>Verse</i>	<i>Marker</i>	<i>Title</i>
1	1-3	Change of location	In Gaza
2	4-22	Time indicator	Delilah
3	23-29	Change of players	Finale
Epilogue	30-31a	New players	
Formula 31b			
Close			

Note: despite the large number of incidents and changes in players in 4-22 the material is presented as a single episode, held together by the continuity of Delilah's presence and the unity of location. As in chapter 15 the absence of time indicators contributes to the pace and suspense of the story.

In Gaza 16:1-3

If chapter 15 ends on a triumphant note, then the first sentence of chapter 16 represents a return to, and even a decline of, the Samson of Timnah—now consorting with a Philistine prostitute! Another unexpected reversal, its impact increased by its juxtaposition with the prior peak. Indeed, it is a feature of the structure of the story that its major peaks are followed by dramatic, unexpected reversals—intended intermarriage after theophany and blessing (13:20-14:2); return to Timnah after the apparent end of the affair (14:20-15:1); and, here, sex with a prostitute after the great triumph of faith.

The incident in Gaza is not only revelatory in its own right but has a number of links with earlier incidents.

First, Samson again 'sees' a woman and proves susceptible, indicating that the incident at Timnah was not a one-off error in judgement but a persistent weakness in character. The new woman's status as a prostitute suggests a serious decline in Samson's devotion to the Lord. It is also reminiscent of the metaphorical representation of the nation playing the harlot earlier in the book,⁶² and intersects with the idea of relationship with foreign women as a reflection of or step towards apostasy.⁶³

⁶² Judges 2:17.

⁶³ Ex. 23; 31-35; 34:16; 1 Kings 11:1-4.

Second, Samson, as in his earlier raid on Ashkelon, displays a cavalier sense of invulnerability by entering the Philistines' main city, and the one farthest from his home territory.

Third, Samson, as at Timnah, is unaware of his opponents' activities—it is not superior brains that deliver him from danger but the exercise of God's gift.

Fourth, the Philistines set an ambush for Samson and, as at Ramat

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Lehi, believe that they have him trapped and are proved wrong to the point of ridicule—Samson surprising them with the timing of his departure, and ironically walking off with the very gates that were meant to imprison him, from the very place where the ambush was laid.

Fifth, as at Timnah, Samson's sin does not affect his strength.

These links with prior incidents establish a pattern which shapes the reader's expectations for the next incident—Samson is susceptible to women, thinks himself invincible, is unaware of opposition, and triumphs, despite sin. The close relationship in time and themes between the two incidents is reinforced by the minimal nature of the break-some time later (*wayehi ahareken*).

Delilah 16:4-22

In this episode we are introduced into an established, sinful relationship, indicating a further decline in Samson. This is not a one-night stand but an on-going affair. Samson, like Israel, is living in open rebellion to God's law.

Samson loved (*'ahav*) Delilah, a more intense descriptor than that used for the Timnite, and therefore an indicator of greater vulnerability. This danger is accentuated by the fact that she is named—significant since, so far, only Samson and Manoah have been named. The suspense is further increased by the following:

One: Delilah's location either in or on the edge of Philistine territory; the elevation of the conflict to a national level—the Philistines are united against Samson, now presented as a judge and therefore the Israelites' national leader.

Two: the fact that the Philistines realize that they cannot simply overwhelm Samson by force of numbers but must discover the secret of his strength.

Three: the use of a woman to discover the secret, paralleling the use of the Timnite.

Four: the huge value of the bribe they offer Delilah.

Five: the fact that this is the third episode involving a woman. As Wenham points out,⁶⁴ the triad form is a common motif in Old Testament literature and leads to the expectation that the third episode will be the climactic one.

⁶⁴ G J Wenham, *Numbers* (London 1981) 17.

The Philistines open negotiations with Delilah by telling her to lure (*pati*) Samson: precisely the same word used by their compatriots to the Timnite,⁶⁵ generating a sense of foreboding in the reader. Her complicity with the Philistines, like Judah's complicity before,⁶⁶ is reinforced by her use of the same words to Samson as they used to her, except for the natural omission of 'how we can overpower him' (*bammeh nukal lo*).

verse 5: *bammeh koho gadol ubammeh nukal to wa'asarnuhu leannoto*

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verse 6: *bammeh kohka gadol ubammeh te'aser le'annotka* (The Philistines, v5: 'the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so that we may tie him up and subdue him.' Delilah, v6: 'the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.')

The account of Delilah's first three attempts to discover Samson's secret is written to suggest that Samson is getting closer to revealing the truth. In the first lie Samson uses the number seven, the number of his braids, and states that thongs 'that have not been dried' should be used. This is conceptually similar to Samson's uncut hair in that something that one would have expected to happen to them has not. The same idea of untouchedness is used in the second lie, and with the same form of clause—'ropes that have never been used.' The third lie comes closest to the truth, echoes the Jael/Sisera story,⁶⁷ includes the number seven and, for the first time, Samson's hair—'if you weave the seven braids of my hair...'

If Samson's resistance is perhaps eroding, then Delilah's actions reveal that she is losing confidence. In response to the first lie, the rulers of the Philistines bring her the thongs; but thereafter she seems to supply herself. In the first two incidents men are hidden in the room, but not in the last. It is as if Delilah does not want to waste anyone's time. This removal of players from the scene reduces the tension, just as in the following episode the return of the Philistine leaders increases it.

If we see Samson getting closer to the truth and Delilah losing confidence, one element remains common to all three lies and to the disclosure of the truth—the predicted result: 'I would become weak and be like any other man.' (*wehaliti we hayyiti ke'ahad ha'adam*)

For Webb,⁶⁸ this reveals Samson's desire to be like any other man and is the underlying motive for his self-betrayal. In this there is, too, an echo of the wedding at Timnah which Samson celebrated 'as the young men (bridegrooms) did',⁶⁹—Samson as young man and as judge wanting to be like others and not to be 'separated to God.'⁷⁰ As such the tension at this point does not just revolve round the physical danger to Samson, but round the issues of holiness and essential allegiance. The fact that the cutting of hair was the one element of the

⁶⁵ Judges 14:15.

⁶⁶ Judges 15:11-14.

⁶⁷ Compare the use of *tq'* and *ytd* at 4:21 & 16:14. Samson, like Sisera, thinks it safe to sleep in a woman's quarters. At this point, Samson is successful where Sisera was not, but this success is to prove transitory and the sense of foreboding raised by the allusion finds its tragic fulfilment.

⁶⁸ Webb, *Judges*, 169.

⁶⁹ Judges 14:10.

⁷⁰ Cf Numbers 6.

Nazirite vow mentioned by the angel raises the tension still further—surely God will not overlook any infringement of this component?

The Sting 16:15-16

After three failures Delilah changes tactics, using emotional blackmail—'How can you say, "I love you," when your heart is not with me.'—as the Timnite did, and the same tactic of incessant complaint.⁷¹ Indeed the same word *tsiq* (nag) is used, though the greater intensity of Delilah's assault is captured by the use of a second verb *'alats* (prod) and by the onomatopoeia of the sharp *'ts'* sound in three of the four verbs in

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the sentence. Finally, the intensity of the pressure on Samson finds expression in the ominous irony of the metaphor, 'he was tired to death' (*watiktsar napso lamut*), referring in the context to his emotional state, but a reminder of what is really at stake and an anticipation of his death.

Disclosure 16:17

The sincerity of Samson's disclosure of his secret is not just inherent in the content of what he says but in the way that it is related. Delilah consistently asked Samson to *'ngd'* (tell, say) but in his three lies the verb *'amar* (say) is used to describe his speech. Here, though, in v. 17 *'ngd'* is used. This conforms to the use of *'ngd'* in the incident at Timnah where it always refers to telling the truth. Similarly, here Samson uses the passive voice to describe the action necessary to strip him of his strength—'If my head were shaved' (*gulahti*). Heretofore, Samson used the active voice on every occasion, but Delilah always used the passive form 'you may be bound' (*te'aser*). Finally, the narrator's comment 'and he told her all his heart' makes it clear that Samson has responded to Delilah's earlier complaint 'your heart is not with me' (*welibka 'ein 'itti*).⁷² Samson's response, then, is recorded in a way that conforms to the way Delilah's questions were framed. Style is used to reinforce complicity, as we have seen before.

Delilah is then described as seeing (*watter'e*) the truth of Samson's disclosure, thus fulfilling the Philistine rulers' original brief to 'see' (*r'ei*) if she could discover his secret (16:5). Her summoning of the rulers, and the arrival of the money, point clearly to the expectation of Samson's fall. Samson, as at Timnah, finds himself thoroughly deceived. However, in this incident, the parallel is not just with the pattern of his past but, as noted above,⁷³ also with the demise of Sisera—Samson ironically falling in the same way as an enemy of the Lord.

Indeed, the account is full of irony. Samson crying out: *'etse' kepa'am bepa'am* ('I shall go out this time as before') makes an ironic counterpoint to the use of *pa'am* (time, occasion) 2 verses earlier where Delilah at least realizes that this time (*pa'am*) it is different. The putting out of Samson's eyes is an ironically appropriate punishment—was it not seeing and doing what was right in his own eyes that got him into trouble? There is irony in the choice of Gaza as the town to take him to—not just the capital but the place to avenge Samson's humiliating theft of its gates. There is irony in the idea that the man who is so often described as 'going

⁷¹ Judges 14:17. Note that the sheer density of allusions back to chapters 13-15, the conformity of style and themes, and the matching of patterns, do seem to combine to severely undermine Boling's contention that chapter 16 was composed by a later redactor. Cf Boling, *Judges*, 30.

⁷² Judges 16:15.

⁷³ Cf 62 above.

down' (*yrd*) is in this instance 'brought down' (*wayoridu*, 16:21). Finally, there is the irony of Samson's servitude. The great hero doing work usually assigned to women,⁷⁴ or donkeys, or oxen. Samson turned into a woman, by being defeated by a woman;⁷⁵ Samson, who made donkeys of the Philistines, becoming a donkey himself; Samson who demeaned his first wife as a heifer (*'eglah*) becoming a bovine himself. Furthermore, Dagon was the Philistines'

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god of corn so Samson's servitude as a grinder (*tohen*) can be seen as servitude to Dagon, grinding out what Dagon had provided.

This description of Samson's apparently hopeless situation is concluded with the enigmatic comment—'but the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.' Is the writer suggesting that Samson's strength is in his hair? If not, why mention the obvious fact that hair grows? But if so, is there no retribution for the fact that the Nazirite vow has now been broken in all its components and particularly in the one that the angel of the Lord had highlighted? On what basis will strength return? Again the narrator leaves the reader to his own theological considerations, but makes it clear that the growth of the hair is a signal of hope, thereby creating a sense of suspenseful expectation.

Finale 16:23-30

Samson's capture is 'seen'⁷⁶ by the Philistine people as a victory for Dagon. The repetition of 'Our god has delivered our enemy (Samson) into our hands,'⁷⁷ and the convocation of a great sacrifice, reinforce the point. Importantly, this serves to reframe the entire conflict with the Philistines in theological and not merely political terms.

Samson is brought to the temple and humiliated further. Even though this is the zenith of Philistine triumph and the nadir of Samson's degradation, the expectation of reversal is actually heightened because Philistine triumph has heretofore always been an antecedent to defeat. And increasingly costly defeat at that.

Samson is led between the pillars and, in keeping with his flair with words, asks the boy to show him the pillars so that he might 'lean' on them—not telling the lad quite how hard he intends to do so. It is at this point, when Samson merely has to lean, that the narrator, as ever master of suspense, delays the peak of the incident with information that lends dimension to the anticipated carnage. The temple is full of men and women—had not both brought about Samson's fall? *All*⁷⁸ the rulers were there—had they not engineered his betrayal? The total number is huge—3000.

The peak is then further delayed by Samson's prayer, which contrasts markedly with the prayer at En-haqqore. The direct, informal style there is replaced by a more formal, pleading tone. God is here not just 'you',⁷⁹ without any name reference, but lord, Yahweh and Elohim. Samson uses the formal enclitic '*na*' twice and asks to be remembered, whereas at En-haqqore he assumed that he would be. Samson, contrary to the narrator's earlier hint about the

⁷⁴ Cundall, *Judges*, 136, for reference to women.

⁷⁵ Samson is in bad company—Abimelech (9:53-54), as well as Sisera, suffered the shame of defeat by a woman.

⁷⁶ Judges 16:24.

⁷⁷ Judges 16:23-24.

⁷⁸ Judges 16:27.

⁷⁹ Judges 15:18.

source of his returning strength, is not described as a man confident in his growing braids, but rather as a man who needs God's direct intervention. Samson's humility, however, has not altered his essentially retributive, individualistic understanding of the conflict. For him, it is a matter of personal revenge for his eyes, not a matter of national significance, still less, as it will be for David, a

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matter of involving God's glory: 'For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?'⁸⁰

Finally, with the pillars in his hands, he asks that he might die with the Philistines, not clinging to his identity as an Israelite, separated to God, but wanting in his death to be like a member of all other nations. Perhaps it is a recognition of guilt—it was to a Philistine that he had given his heart⁸¹ so it was appropriate that he should die with them. Again, it is a sad contrast with the incident at En-hakkore where he expressed horror at the prospect of falling into the hands of the 'uncircumcised'. Even the change of descriptor is significant—there he viewed them with disgust, as outside the covenant, here he simply gives them their name. Nevertheless, Samson's leaning on the pillars is an act of faith—he trusts that God will respond. In this final act, then, we see Samson the Philistine and Samson the Yahwist—the tension between the two unresolved in his own mind even at his death.

However we understand the significance of Samson's death from his personal perspective, its location in Dagon's temple, in the middle of a sacrifice celebrating Dagon's victory, leads to the conclusion that it is not so much Samson's eyes that have been avenged but Yahweh's supremacy over Dagon that has been decisively demonstrated. Samson's Naziriteship may or may not have been reinaugurated, God may or may not be honouring the terms of Samson's individualistic prayer but, in granting him strength, he not only kills Samson's personal enemies and wipes out the leadership of his people's enemies, but demonstrates the impotence of a false god and the folly of following him. As at the end of chapter 13 and chapter 15, this section ends with God responding to prayer in a definitive act of self-revelation. The rubble and corpses at Gaza proclaim first and foremost the sovereignty of Yahweh.

The Wrap 16:30-31

Whatever the content of Samson's own verdict on his life, the narrator presents Samson's death as his greatest victory—killing more men in death than he did in life. Furthermore, the story ends with the description of his burial, not with the Philistines but in his father's grave in his own territory, brought there by the people of his father's house whose daughters he had rejected for the Timnite.⁸² A confirmation perhaps of his ultimate identity as an Israelite. The positive picture is only partial—Samson, like Jephthah, has no heir, a personal dishonour and a sad irony, the story ending as it began with a picture of personal barrenness. Furthermore, the formula close, unlike the closes for the early judges,⁸³ omits any mention of any years of peace brought about by his judgeship.

Continuity with Chapters 17-19

⁸⁰ 1 Sam 17:26.

⁸¹ Judges 16:18.

⁸² Judges 15:3.

⁸³ Judges 3:11; 3:30; 5:31.

Although Cundall,⁸⁴ for example, sees chapters 17-19 as appendices to

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the book, our analysis of the Samson narrative suggests two vital links, beyond the continuation of the downward spiral of sin. One: the theme of holiness continues. Both subsequent stories revolve round the compromised standards, not merely of a member of an ordinary tribe called to be set apart for God, but round members of the tribe called to be set apart for God—the Levites.⁸⁵ Two: the theme of seeing continues as the nation comes to display the same individualistic standards as Samson, doing what was right in their own eyes. Indeed, this is to be the narrator's final statement about Israel at the end of the book (21:25).

The Samson story is, then, the thematic platform for the rest of the book.

CONCLUSIONS

The Samson story is history told, as we have seen, as a suspense story—the narrator creating tension through structure, anticipatory details, repeated patterns, ambiguities of language and detail, puns, delays in the peak of incidents and reversed expectations. Indeed as a suspense story it has much in common with modern thrillers—the lone hero, witty like Bond, victorious against impossible odds, vulnerable to the age-old tactic—the female enemy agent—captured and taken, apparently helpless, to the heart of the enemy's operations—as in so many Bond films—there to wreak more devastation than in the rest of the story. In the Samson story, however, the suspense genre is not an end in itself but a highly appropriate form for the content and themes of the story, heightening the impact of the reversal of expectations for Samson's character and matching, too, the difficulty of understanding God's responses to his sins. Further, the *leitmotif* of 'seeing' fits the mystery genre at the level of plot. Samson's wrong seeing precipitates the Timnah, Gaza and Delilah incidents. He fails to see beneath the surface of others to the powers and allegiances that motivate them. However attractive the Timnite, her allegiance is to her people. However attractive Delilah, behind her are the rulers of the Philistines and, behind them, Dagon. Similarly, the Philistines fail to see what lies behind Samson, initially seeing him as a mere man, albeit a very strong one, and even after his fall, seeing only a humiliated hero and not the God behind him.

This theme of right and wrong seeing is, however, not just the generic grist of mystery stories but is here rooted in the central theme of obedience. Samson is presented as someone who is determined to do what is right in his own eyes, regardless of whether it is clearly wrong in God's. It is this wilful disobedience that makes him vulnerable. Spiritual blindness puts him in situations where he is blind to what is going on around him and eventually leads to physical blindness. The Samson story, then, dramatically demonstrates the dangers of doing what is right in your own eyes, of moving away from the standards of a devoted

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generation, and ignoring God's commands. Indeed, at the end of the book, Samson's sin has become the nation's: 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Cundall, *Judges*, 50.

⁸⁵ Judges 18:20, 19:1.

⁸⁶ Judges 21:25.

Samson is implicitly a type for the whole people. This identification of Samson with Israel's history, which is intrinsic to the narrator's presentation, makes the story a solemn warning against Israelite idolatry, a solemn summons to covenant holiness, and a solemn reminder that Israel is God's people. Israel, like Samson, did not choose to be set apart to God, but was chosen. Nevertheless, she must be obedient to her call, and must not seek to be like other nations, as Samson sought to be like other men. Indeed, the centrality of holiness, of *God* as the final point of reference, finds expression, not just in the pivotal role of the Nazirite vow but in the emphasis that the story's peaks impose. The theophany of chapter 13, the water from the rock, the destruction of Dagon's temple are all centred on God's power, self-revelation and glorification. Ultimately, then, it is God who is the hero of the narrative—as initiator of action, sender of spirit, deliverer from thirst, provider of strength, and fulfiller of his purposes. The carnage at Gaza unequivocally demonstrates that God will glorify his name, will show his supremacy, whatever the spiritual state of his people and at whatever cost to them.

This message must have been as relevant under Solomon whose heart was turned from the Lord by his foreign wives,⁸⁷ as in the aftermath of the fall of Samaria. Perhaps, too, it was particularly potent after the exile when the correspondence between the fate of Zedekiah and Samson must have been startling—both blinded, both bound in bronze shackles and both transported to foreign capitals.⁸⁸

In our own age, the story continues to capture the imagination and continues to work as *marshal*, as readers and commentators ponder its ambiguities and silences. Despite its many enigmas, its central call to holiness and allegiance to God is clear. As such, it stands as a warning against the relativism and individualism of our age, a warning of the danger of sexual temptation as a step towards apostasy, and a reminder that God's people are called to a holiness and obedience that must be rooted in a fundamental allegiance to him and an acceptance of identity as his people. Finally, the story is a reminder that God will accomplish his purposes in history and glorify his name—with or without the allegiance of the people he has called to be holy.

The Samson story—enigma variations on the theme of holiness.

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⁸⁷ 1 Kings 11:1-3.

⁸⁸ 2 Kings 25:7.