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**SAMSON AND THE HONEYTRAPS:**

**YAHWEH'S USE OF WOMEN TO ENSNARE SAMSON**

Fred H. Ruddell

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In this paper I extend Brueggemann's well-known countertestimony model to provide a theological framework for the Samson narrative (Judges 13-16). To do this, I propose adding to Israel's countertestimony of abuse the claim that *Yahweh is the deity who traps*. I examine Samson's relationships with the Timnite woman, the Gaza prostitute and Delilah, showing how Yahweh used these women to ensnare Samson in a succession of 'honeytraps'. I identify a wisdom-literature theme in Samson's life that acts as countertestimony of the hiddenness of Yahweh and I also find evidence of a more overtly abusive form of countertestimony where Yahweh used women to 'entice'/'seduce' Samson. I conclude that the story of Samson's life demonstrates theological countertestimony expressed within the framework of sexual entrapment, so that Yahweh could use Samson to exact his vengeance against the Philistines and their god, Dagon.

*Introduction*

Although Samson was not a national leader like Deborah or Gideon, he nevertheless fulfils a pivotal role in the book of Judges. When the people of Israel yet again did evil in the eyes of Yahweh and were punished by Philistine oppression, Samson was heralded as the one who 'would begin to deliver Israel' (Judg. 13.5). In fact, Samson and Othniel are the only major 'judges' who also 'delivered' Israel.<sup>1</sup> It is particularly ironic that the wayward Danite, Samson, should be so linked with Othniel, the Judahite who is regarded as the model judge.<sup>2</sup> However, the so-called deliverance that Samson wrought against the Philistines in revenge for being blinded (16.28) did not

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<sup>1</sup> Only the lesser figure, Tola, also specifically judged (טפן) and delivered (שי) Israel.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Marc Zvi Brettler sees Judges as a highly political, pro-David book, believing that Othniel 'was created as a model of an unambiguously positive Judean leader'; *The Book of Judges* (Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2002), p. 111.

immediately translate into peace in Israel. The tribal league simply disintegrated into 'every man for himself', thus emphasising the need for strong national leadership in the form of a king. Since Samson acted as the bridging figure between the earlier 'conventional' judges and the chaos of Judges 17-21, he may be described as the 'chaotic judge', around whom the book of Judges revolves.

Therefore, a study of the Samson narrative (Judges 13-16) will illuminate the message of the book of Judges as a whole. However, the very nature of this 'chaotic judge' resists thematisation. This is a characteristic of the Old Testament and those who adopt an overly systematic thematisation risk reductionism.<sup>3</sup> Yet a framework is still required which is capable of reconciling the disjunctive nature of the Samson narrative with the coincident and persistent theological theme that underlies the entire book of Judges. This framework must recognise the demise of positivist theologies that largely reflected the philosophies and cultural products spawned by the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann's well-known and imaginative response to this 'collapse of history' is to adopt the interactive language of core testimony and countertestimony within the context of a court of law, thus allowing the '*plurality of voices*' which comprise the substance of Old Testament theology to be heard.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that this dialectic approach provides a suitably inclusive model to facilitate an investigation of the enigmatic character of Samson and his links with the equally enigmatic character of Yahweh.

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Bruce K. Waltke believes that 'the discipline of Old Testament theology is necessarily reductionistic – the emphasis has to be on the selection of major concepts of the books and on the development of major themes that are shared by the various books'; *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1997), p. xvi, italics original.

## Ruddell, **Samson and the Honey Traps**, *IBS 29* Issue 2 2011

Brueggemann only mentions Samson texts indirectly in his *Theology*, in the context of sexual abuse in countertestimony.<sup>6</sup> However, it is appropriate and desirable to extend this countertestimony model to provide a theological framework for the entire Samson story. To do this, I propose adding to Israel's countertestimony of abuse the claim that *Yahweh is the deity who traps*. The escalating violence in the story eventually traps both Samson and the Philistines in a final, catastrophic event that would begin the liberation of Israel. I believe that this is the first time that a direct connection has been made between the Samson narrative and a theology of countertestimony. This approach therefore opens up hitherto unexplored avenues to assist in the understanding of the characters of both Samson and Yahweh.

In this paper I will focus on Samson's relationships with women, exploring how Yahweh used these women as traps, because Yahweh 'was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines' (Judg. 14.4). By studying this episode of the Samson story, I will demonstrate how Samson was ensnared in a succession of 'honeytraps'.

As Exum has so rightly pointed out: 'The story of Samson is a story about women. Just try to imagine it without them.'<sup>7</sup> The central role played by Samson's mother is very evident in the birth narrative of Judges 13. Yahweh's plan for Samson's adult life is further enacted through his relationships with three more women: his Timnite bride, the Gaza prostitute, and Delilah (Judges 14-16). Indeed, Alter observes that Samson 'passes through' a series of three women who represent the full spectrum of female sexual partners, 'wife, whore and mistress'.<sup>8</sup>

In a parallel fashion, Matthews identifies the centrality of freedom in Samson's life, commenting that 'the traps that ensnare Samson begin

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 360.

<sup>7</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter, 'Samson Without Folklore', in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 47-56 (48).

at his birth and run through a series of encounters with Philistine women'.<sup>9</sup> He interprets the Samson narrative within the framework of a three-stage 'trap motif' containing a series of steps through which Samson is ensnared in a web of sexual attraction to foreign women.<sup>10</sup> First, Samson's involvement with the three Philistine women is always portrayed as resulting from his own uncontrolled physical desires. Secondly, each woman entices Samson into a trap. Thirdly, Samson's heroic action leads to his escape and ultimate revenge against the Philistines. I will now examine Samson's relationships with each of these women within the context of countertestimony, showing how Yahweh used women to trap Samson through a series of doomed sexual liaisons.

*A 'Mixed' Marriage: Samson and the Timnite Woman*

In Judges 14-15 the focus of Samson's life shifts from his anonymous mother to the anonymous woman of Timnah, whom he wanted as his wife (14.2). However, this woman was not an Israelite, she was a foreigner, 'one of the daughters of the Philistines' (14.1). The perils of associating with 'strange' (זרה), 'foreign' (נכרית) women are repeatedly emphasised in Proverbs 1-9. For example, wisdom is said to save a man 'from the forbidden [זרה] woman, from the adulteress [נכרית] with her smooth words' (Prov. 2.16; 7.5 ESV). Newsom argues that as a foreigner this woman recalls the strong Israelite cultural preference for endogamy over exogamy, 'the choice of same over other'.<sup>11</sup> The Timnite woman was created especially by Yahweh to ensnare Samson and he fell into the trap. Samson's trip to Timnah is an expression of divinely-induced restlessness and the Timnite woman who catches his eye is an agent of Yahweh's grand

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<sup>9</sup> Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>11</sup> Carol A. Newsom also believes that, if the woman is an adulteress, she may be called strange/foreign because she is legally 'off limits'; 'Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9', in Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1989), pp. 142-160 (148).

plan. This entrapment episode thus marks the next stage in Samson's God-ordained mission.

Presumably Samson found the Timnite woman very attractive, since the text twice emphasises that she was 'right in his eyes' (Judg. 14.3, 7).<sup>12</sup> The 'eyes' motif is central to the book of Judges and Samson is the pivotal character in the development of this theological theme. Samson's rejection of his parents' advice in favour of what was 'right in his eyes' now introduces the anarchy that will escalate throughout the closing chapters of the book of Judges. There, the repeated refrain that 'each man did what was right in his own eyes' (17.6; 21.25) is also associated with the comment that 'in those days there was no king in Israel' (17.6; 18.1; 19.1; 21.25). This statement is not used as a favourable description of the people's freedom but rather as a sign of lawlessness and may be viewed as an indicator of pro-monarchy, anti-tribal, ideology in Judges 17-21.<sup>13</sup> Samson followed his eyes and his choice of bride led to a degenerating cycle of violence with the Philistines that was consistent with his divinely-ordained mission. Schneider notes the irony that at the end of the Samson story it is his eyes, which initiated the tragic events of his adulthood, that were destroyed (16.21).<sup>14</sup> Samson's eyes caused his entrapment by women and were eventually the means by which the Philistines imprisoned him in darkness.

Samson's parents expressed surprise that he could not find a suitable bride from among their own people and stated their disapproval of his desire to take a wife from 'the uncircumcised Philistines' (Judg.

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<sup>12</sup> The theological implications of this expression, that 'she was right in his mind/opinion, according to his standards rather than according to the standards of God', are noted by Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (New American Commentary, 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), p. 426.

<sup>13</sup> Gale A. Yee, 'Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body', in Gale A. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1995), pp. 146-170 (167).

<sup>14</sup> Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry; Colleagueville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 204.

14.3). In the Samson story it is only in Judges 14-15 that the Philistines are referred to by this highly derogatory label, 'the uncircumcised' (הערלים) (14.3; 15.18), which is more descriptively translated as 'the foreskinned'.<sup>15</sup> In cultural terms, possession of foreskins meant that Philistines were viewed by the Israelites as 'dirty and barbaric'.<sup>16</sup> Presumably the Philistines were equally bigotted against the Israelites and therefore Samson's proposed 'mixed' marriage to the Timnite woman was viewed with suspicion by both communities. Indeed, as Block believes, disapproval of Samson's plans was based simply on cultural and ethnic reasons, rather than any interest in covenantal issues.<sup>17</sup>

Samson's physical desire for this Philistine woman therefore led him inexorably down the path of conflict with the Philistines. This was no random path, as explained by the narrator in Judg. 14.4: 'His father and mother did not know that it was from Yahweh [בַּיהוָה], for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.' The ignorance of Samson's parents is critical. Despite the hero's auspicious beginnings and their knowledge of his calling, they have failed to discern Yahweh's hidden plan. This marriage is Yahweh's response to Israel's willingness to coexist peacefully with the Philistines. Yahweh is determined to shatter the status quo and as Block observes, 'Samson is his tool chosen to rile up the Philistines, and this woman offers the opportunity to make it happen'.<sup>18</sup> Although Samson appears to be a free spirit, doing whatever he pleases without respect for his parents or the claims of Yahweh on his life, he is in fact programmed and controlled by Yahweh to do his divine will.

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<sup>15</sup> The Philistines are also referred to as 'uncircumcised' in 1 Sam. 14.6; 17.26, 36; 31.4 (1 Chron. 10.4); 2 Sam. 1.20.

<sup>16</sup> Schneider, *Judges*, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 425. It is unlikely that the link between circumcision and the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17) would have been at the forefront of Samson's parents' minds.

<sup>18</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 426.

Therefore Judg. 14.4 is a pivotal text which reveals the real driving force behind Samson's relationships with women. This verse echoes the wisdom-literature theme of Yahweh's sovereign inclination to override human intentions, as observed by Brueggemann in several texts in Proverbs.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Prov. 20.24 could almost be describing Samson when it states that 'a man's steps are from Yahweh [מִיְהוָה]; how then can man understand his way?' In fact Brettler argues that many of the stories contained in Judges 14-15, in contrast to the rest of the Samson material, 'have very close affinities to wisdom material and themes'.<sup>20</sup>

It is notable that the reference to Yahweh in Judg. 14.4, like that in Prov. 20.24, does not assign a verb to Yahweh, but only a preposition. This lack of active verb of transformation is an important characteristic of Brueggemann's concept of Israel's countertestimony of Yahweh, which provides evidence that God is on many occasions 'hidden – indirect and not visible'.<sup>21</sup> He believes that this most benign form of countertestimony is expressed within the context of wisdom theology.<sup>22</sup> Since Brueggemann has found evidence for such countertestimony mainly in the books of Psalms and Proverbs, and Brettler has demonstrated links between Judges 14-15 and wisdom literature, I consider that it is now possible to associate this section of the Samson story with a countertestimony of the 'hiddenness' of Yahweh. Although Yahweh certainly appears to be largely absent from this narrative, his divine agenda is always being achieved in Samson's life.

### *Samson and 'The Spirit of Yahweh'*

However unwittingly under Yahweh's control, Samson set out on his fateful journey to marry a Philistine girl. As he 'went down' to Timnah with his parents he alone was confronted by a roaring lion in

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<sup>19</sup> Prov. 16.1-2, 9; 19.14, 21; 20.24; 21.30-31. See Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 349.

<sup>20</sup> Brettler, *Judges*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 333.

<sup>22</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 334.



the vineyards (Judg. 14.5).<sup>23</sup> Although there is no evidence that the animal actually attacked Samson, 'the spirit of Yahweh [רוח יהוה] rushed [צלה] upon him' and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands (v. 6). Although the spirit of Yahweh previously began to 'stir' (פעם) Samson in Mahaneh-dan (13.25),<sup>24</sup> this is the first time that God's spirit 'rushed' (צלה) upon him, an experience repeated in Judg. 14.19 and 15.14. A similar phrase is used in Samuel's commissioning of Saul (1 Sam. 10.6) and again when Saul is informed of the threat to Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam. 11.6). McCarter comments that for both Saul and Samson, 'the hero experiences the spirit as an explosive surge of strength'.<sup>25</sup> Although, unlike Saul, Samson will never prophesy or lead the Israelites in battle, the phrase certainly suggests that Samson was somehow physically possessed by the invigorating spirit of God and thus empowered with superhuman strength. Yahweh was now flexing his muscles through Samson's actions and the killing of the lion proved that Yahweh's new weapon was now fully primed for action.

The other two occasions that Samson displayed his strength while empowered by Yahweh's spirit are both direct actions against the Philistines. First, when Samson's riddle was solved by the Philistines 'the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him', enabling him to kill thirty men in the Philistine port of Ashkelon and use their garments to pay his wager (Judg. 14.19). Secondly, in Judg. 15.14, as the Philistines came out to meet the bound Samson at Lehi expecting to capture him, 'the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him' and the ropes binding him disintegrated in his hands. Samson then

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<sup>23</sup> J. Cheryl Exum observes that 'repetition of the motif of going down structures the material in ch. 14 into four episodes', each introduced by the verb ירד 'to go down' (14.1, 5, 7, 19); 'Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga', *JSOT* 19 (1981), pp. 3-29 (12-13).

<sup>24</sup> Judg. 13.25 'forms an inclusio with Judg. 16.31a, beginning and ending the exploits of Samson "between Zorah and Eshtaol"'; J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga', *VT* 33 (1983), pp. 30-45 (38 n. 18).

<sup>25</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary* (AB, 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 182.

went on the offensive, using a jawbone of a donkey to slaughter one thousand Philistines (v. 15).<sup>26</sup> Yahweh's plan to stir up the relationship between Israel and the Philistines was now in full swing.

However, it is also important to note when Samson's violent actions are *not* empowered either by the spirit of Yahweh or by a response to Samson's call for divine assistance. First, when Samson is refused entry to his wife's chamber we are told that he vents his frustration by setting fire to their grain, vineyards and olive groves with burning torches tied to foxes' tails (Judg. 15.1-5). Although this is presented as an impressive anti-Philistine act which strikes at the heart of their economy, Margalith dismisses it as an 'aetiological story' ascribed to Samson.<sup>27</sup> The Hebrew word שועל used in Judg. 15.4 ('fox' or 'jackal') may also be associated with the name of the Danite village of Shaalbim ('haunt of foxes').<sup>28</sup> Margalith believes that in the period of Philistine domination the colloquial Greek word for fox, λαμπουρις ('torch-tail') was introduced into the local Canaanite aetiological legends. Secondly, in revenge for the murder of his wife by the Philistines, Samson 'struck them hip and thigh with a great blow' (15.8). Although the text does not quantify the number of casualties, Boling describes this scene as 'a tremendous slaughter', where Samson left the Philistines as 'a tangle of legs and thighs'.<sup>29</sup> I believe that the inclusion of these examples of military folklore is designed to emphasise Samson's prowess by reinforcing the stories of Samson's infusion with the spirit of Yahweh and the linked riddle episode.

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<sup>26</sup> Robert G. Boling translates אֶלֶף ('thousand') as 'contingent' and he argues that this 'recovery of the old military usage ... brings a popular story into the realm of the plausible'; *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 6A; New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 237-238.

<sup>27</sup> Othniel Margalith, 'Samson's Foxes', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 224-229 (227).

<sup>28</sup> Shaalbim (Judg. 1.35) / Shaalabbin (Josh. 19.42) was located in the original territory of Dan. See BDB, 'שְׂעָלָיִים', p. 1043.

<sup>29</sup> Boling, *Judges*, p. 235.

*A Trap Within a Trap: Samson's Riddle*

The wedding-feast riddle episode is a central theme of Judges 14, which is in fact the only Old Testament example of a complete riddle narrative used in a social context in ancient Israel.<sup>30</sup> The text records Samson's riddle (v. 14), the Philistines' response (v. 18a) and Samson's final retort (v. 18b). In general, riddles depend on ambiguity within language, simultaneously communicating on both surface and sub-surface levels. Indeed, Crenshaw notes that 'essential to riddles is the setting of a trap'.<sup>31</sup> They attempt to mislead the hearer by offering coded language that masquerades as common speech. As Samson was surrounded by Philistines ('young men' and thirty 'companions'), he astutely uses a riddle to exert his authority on the wedding feast by turning a potential physical contest into a verbal one.<sup>32</sup> Niditch comments that Samson's riddle, based on the assumption 'I know something you don't know', is an attempt to gain power over his Philistine in-laws.<sup>33</sup> Although Samson had certainly been trapped by Yahweh into marrying the Timnite as an 'opportunity' to trap the Philistines, Samson also used his riddle to set a trap for his Philistine bride. I therefore propose that the structure of this complex 'trap within a trap' may be summarised as follows:

The spirit of Yahweh rushed upon Samson (v. 6)  
Samson thus empowered to kill the lion (v. 6)  
Samson ate the honey from the lion's carcass (vv. 8-9)  
Samson set his riddle (vv. 12-14)

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, eight of the seventeen Old Testament occurrences of the word *חידה* ('riddle') are found in this chapter.

<sup>31</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (London: SPCK, 1979), p. 100.

<sup>32</sup> Block believes that the word 'companions' used to identify these thirty men (Judg. 14.11) is 'ambiguous' and he suggests they were in fact 'bodyguards', placed by the Philistines because they were afraid of Samson; *Judges*, pp. 431-432.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Niditch, 'Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak', *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 608-624 (620-621).

Surface meaning (v. 15): *Trap for Samson's wife*

Betrayal of Samson by his wife (v. 17)

Sub-surface solution (v. 18a): *Trap for the Philistines*

Samson's retort (v. 18b)

The spirit of Yahweh rushed upon Samson (v. 19)

Samson thus empowered to kill Philistines (v. 19)

The layers of this riddle episode will now be examined in some detail.

Samson's first two actions under the control of the spirit of Yahweh (Judg. 14.6, 19) form an inclusio around the riddle episode (vv. 12-18). It is clear to the reader (but obviously not to the Philistines) that Samson's spirit-empowered killing of the lion and eating the honey from its carcass provided him with the subject-matter for his riddle. To pay the hefty wager after his riddle was solved he was again empowered by the spirit, this time to kill thirty Philistines. This forms the main plot of the riddle episode. This riddle was a trap for the Philistines set by Yahweh, who through his spirit provided his agent Samson with both the inspiration for the riddle and the means by which he could pay the resulting debt. Camp and Fontaine comment on the irony here that 'the human skill and inspiration for non-violent manipulation of social conflict is given by God and, paradoxically, that the human skill and drive for outrageous violence also comes on the same divine breath'.<sup>34</sup>

However, contained within this story is a sub-plot describing how the Philistines obtained the answer to Samson's riddle. Indeed, the entire riddle episode hinges on the question of whether Samson's riddle could in fact be solved by the Philistines. Samson's challenge to the Philistines was as follows:

מהאכל יצא מאכל  
ומעו יצא מחוק

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<sup>34</sup> Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, 'The Words of the Wise and their Riddles', in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 127-151 (148).

From the eater came something to eat,  
and from the strong came something sweet (Judg. 14.14).

Samson's riddle thus comprises two statements, each of three words, and employs synonymous parallelism.<sup>35</sup> Two-line parallelism is the typical style of Hebrew poetry, as evidenced in the book of Proverbs. Indeed, Prov. 1.6 states that one of the goals of that book is 'to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles [חידה]'. Therefore the sequence of riddles in Judges 14 further ties this unit to biblical wisdom traditions.

Nel shows that the main strategy of Samson's riddle is to highlight the two key words, 'strong' and 'sweet', and simultaneously to signify a 'particular reality' encompassing them both.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the eater is identified with the strong and the thing to be eaten is identified with something sweet. Thus, the Philistines would have been (mis)led to ask a question like, 'What is sweet to eat that comes out of a strong eater?' Assuming that the 'strong eater' is the bridegroom, two possible answers are immediately suggested by the wedding feast context. First, it has been suggested that the 'something sweet' could be vomit induced by heavy drinking at the wedding 'feast'.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, the more likely possibility is that the riddle suggests copulation, a topic which is naturally associated with wedding celebrations. In this solution the 'sweet food' signifies semen, which Crenshaw suggests 'is sweet to the bride who "eats" the sperm'.<sup>38</sup> This perceived functional similarity between eating and copulation is well illuminated by the lascivious text of Prov. 30.20 which describes the act of an adulteress: 'she eats and wipes her mouth and says, "I have done no wrong"'. Although erotic

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<sup>35</sup> Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Nel, 'The Riddle of Samson (Judg. 14.14, 18)', *Bib* 66 (1985), pp. 534-545 (543).

<sup>37</sup> Camp and Fontaine, 'Words of the Wise', p. 141; Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 115. Camp and Fontaine further contend that the 'strong eater' may be either the bridegroom or the woman; 'Words of the Wise', pp. 141-142.

subject-matter *appears* to provide the answer to the riddle, this is only a surface-level solution which functions as a diversionary trap, aimed, as we shall see, more at Samson's bride than at the Philistines in general.

Samson's riddle has been attacked on two grounds. First, a riddle must provide a genuine clue that makes the question inherently answerable. Secondly, the subject of the riddle must belong to a shared experience. As Crenshaw points out, 'Samson's riddle hardly meets either criterion'.<sup>39</sup> How then could the Philistines possibly work out the correct (sub-surface) meaning of his challenge? Camp and Fontaine argue that, far from being a 'bad riddle', Samson's riddle is carefully crafted, using linguistic and metaphorical resources to generalise from his personal experience so as to make the riddle answerable, 'if exceedingly difficult'.<sup>40</sup> This may be a theoretical possibility, but I believe that this credits the Philistine wedding guests with more insight than they could have realistically mustered in the context of their extended 'drinking bout'! I therefore conclude that it was impossible, on a practical level, for the Philistines to solve Samson's riddle, as it was based on his experiences with the lion which he alone knew about. The text makes it clear that Samson did not tell his father or his mother that he had killed the lion, or that the honey which he gave them came from its carcass (Judg. 14.6, 9).

Although we must assume that the Philistines worked out the surface-level sexual meanings of Samson's riddle, they were also sufficiently alert to recognise that these were misleading traps. The stakes were high and in their desperation to outwit Samson they followed the trail of sexual innuendo to his bride, threatening her with death unless she could 'entice' the real solution from him (Judg. 14.15). Where better to find out the inspiration for Samson's saucy riddle? However, by involving Samson's wife in the contest the Philistines unwittingly forced her into the hidden trap set for her by Samson. Nel emphasises the centrality of 'love' in the riddle,

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<sup>39</sup> Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 113.

<sup>40</sup> Camp and Fontaine, 'Words of the Wise', p. 148.

suggesting that ‘Samson was unable to resist the love of his new bride’.<sup>41</sup> However, the text does not provide evidence of love between Samson and the Timnite woman, merely indicating that Samson was attracted to her (14.3, 7). Despite his desire for this woman, I believe that he used the opportunity presented by his riddle to find out where her true affections lay.

It is crucial to emphasise that the only person apart from Samson who knew the solution to his riddle was his wife, because she was the only person he had told (Judg. 14.17).<sup>42</sup> No one else knew about the ‘particular reality’ of the lion-honey event which had inspired Samson’s riddle. Therefore he knew for certain that it was she who had betrayed him when the Philistines came to him with the correct answer: ‘What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?’ (v. 18a). Samson’s retort, ‘If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle’ (v. 18b), cuts to the heart of the sub-plot in this episode. Samson had tested the integrity of his bride, and in his eyes she had now been found wanting.

The words ‘ploughed’ and ‘heifer’ in Samson’s caustic response to the Philistines reveal his suspicion that they had obtained the solution to the riddle by sleeping with his wife. Indeed, Crenshaw believes that ‘one would be hard put to discover a more apt description of the sexual act’.<sup>43</sup> A thinly veiled example of this ‘ploughing’ metaphor in Israelite literature may be found in Song of Solomon 4.12a: ‘A garden locked is my sister, my bride’. Although ploughing is not mentioned explicitly here, the metaphor is that gardens (like women) are for ‘cultivation’.<sup>44</sup> Samson’s contempt for his bride is evident in his abusive description of her as his ‘heifer’ (עגלה). The ‘haughty’

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<sup>41</sup> Nel, ‘Riddle of Samson’, p. 544.

<sup>42</sup> Judg. 14.16 confirms that Samson had not even told his parents.

<sup>43</sup> Crenshaw turns Samson’s statement into the familiar riddle, ‘What fertile field is ploughed, but not with oxen?’; *Samson*, p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> More explicit sexual references to ‘ploughing’ may be found in the song of Inanna. See S.N. Kramer, ‘Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts’, *ANET*, pp. 637-645 (643).

women of Samaria are similarly attacked in Amos 4.1, where they are effectively called 'fat cows' (פרות הבשן).<sup>45</sup>

Samson was angry with the Philistines for 'cheating' and with the Timnite woman for betraying him. Empowered by the spirit of Yahweh, Samson exacted his revenge on the Philistines and grudgingly paid them his debt (Judg. 14.19). With indecent haste Samson's wife was then given to his so-called 'companion', his 'best man' (v. 20). Maybe this was the man she truly loved and who had already been intimately involved with her in finding out the solution to Samson's riddle? However, Samson's rather pathetic attempt to reclaim his wife (15.1-2) reveals how successfully she had trapped ('enticed') him with her sexuality. Although Samson had exposed her unfaithfulness with his riddle trap, he was obviously still infatuated with her. However, this circular web of intrigue ended in tragedy for the Timnite woman and her father, as the Philistines blamed them for Samson's arson attack on their crops and they were themselves burnt to death (15.6). Although the cycle of violence initiated by the Timnite woman's betrayal of Samson eventually resulted in her death, the sexual trap which she embodied was to be repeated twice more in Samson's life.

*Uncontrolled Lust: Samson Visits the Gaza Prostitute*

The short story of Samson's one-night stand with the prostitute (זנה) in Gaza (Judg. 16.1-3) sits rather uneasily between the detailed descriptions of his protracted relationships with the Timnite woman and Delilah. Samson's involvement with this prostitute emphasises how he is trapped by his need to satisfy his sexual urges. We are simply told that he 'saw' (ראה) this woman and he 'went in to her' (בא אל) (v. 1), suggesting only a minimal relationship with her prior to sexual intercourse. This contrasts with the time Samson spent courting the affections of the Timnite woman. After the disastrous failure of his marriage to the Timnite, Samson was attempting to

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC, 31; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 332.



avoid any sentimental involvement and, as Soggin believes, he was therefore 'content with a transaction of a commercial kind'.<sup>46</sup>

Although this Gaza prostitute is generally regarded as being a Philistine, this is not made explicit in the text. Indeed, Exum argues that she may have been a 'foreign woman', perhaps even an Israelite, who happens to live in Philistia.<sup>47</sup> Schneider develops this theory, believing that the prostitute's apparent failure to notify the authorities about Samson's presence indicates that she is not responsible for the ensuing Philistine ambush attempt.<sup>48</sup> In any event, Samson's entrapment by the prostitute provided Yahweh with another 'opportunity' to act against the Philistines.

Matthews compares Samson's brazen entrance into the major Philistine city of Gaza with his earlier act of going to the Philistine settlement of Timnah.<sup>49</sup> The reaction of the men of Gaza could thus be explained either by reference to Samson's previous actions against the Philistines (if these stories are sequential), or simply as the indignant reaction of the locals to an Israelite who had dared to use the 'services' of their city. Although the Philistines plan to trap Samson when he is fatigued by spending a night of passion with the prostitute, he once again tricks his enemies, this time by his early departure with their city gates on his shoulders (Judg. 16.3).<sup>50</sup>

The folkloristic character of this narrative centres on Samson's superhuman act of uprooting and transporting the gates. However, Margalith believes that 'this story cannot refer to a real city-gate, as archaeological facts prove'.<sup>51</sup> Excavations of city gates of the period provide evidence of two huge monolithic posts dovetailed into the threshold and the lintel, with the upper part of the wall resting on

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<sup>46</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. J. Bowden; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1981), p. 256.

<sup>47</sup> Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> Schneider, *Judges*, p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, p. 155.

<sup>50</sup> Niditch, 'Samson as Culture Hero', p. 621.

<sup>51</sup> Othniel Margalith, 'The Legends of Samson/Heracles', *VT* 37 (1987), pp. 63-70 (68).

them. In order to pull up the two doors along with the posts, 'bar and all' (Judg. 16.3), Samson would have had to lift off the lintel with the whole upper city wall resting on it. Margalith contends that this unrealistic story does not have an aetiological purpose. Instead, he equates the image of Samson setting up the doorposts of the city gate on a hilltop in front of Hebron while the two doors rested on his shoulders with the image of Heracles, Keeper of the Gates of Olympus, well-known in Greek mythology.<sup>52</sup>

It is more likely that Samson's symbolic act of carrying the gates to Hebron should be interpreted as a political statement. Hebron was in the tribal allotment of Judah (Josh. 15.1-13) and Matthews argues that 'it is therefore ironic that Samson returned these pilfered gates to the men of Judah, who had helped the Philistines capture him' (Judges 15).<sup>53</sup> Perhaps, by his defiant act of carrying the gates towards Hebron, Samson was inciting the men of Judah to resist Philistine domination and fight for their freedom. Thus Samson's escape from the trap set for him in Gaza points forward to further violent action against the Philistines. Samson himself acts as the spearhead for this struggle through his climactic destruction of the temple of Dagon, facilitated by his final, and most tragic, entrapment by a woman.

### *Unreciprocated Love: Samson and Delilah*

Through intense interweaving of love and betrayal, the story of Samson and Delilah (Judg. 16.4-22) describes the honeytrap in which Samson was finally caught. In concise narrative, vv. 4-5 provide the reader with all the essential information needed to understand the following story. First, we are told that after his fling with the Gaza prostitute Samson at last *loved* (אָהַב) a woman. This contrasts with his earlier relationships, where Samson was attracted simply by what he *saw* (רָאָה) (14.1; 16.1). However, the text is notably silent about Delilah's feelings towards Samson. We must therefore assume, with Crenshaw, that this episode is a dramatic

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<sup>52</sup> Margalith, 'Legends', p. 69.

<sup>53</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, p. 156.

tragedy of ‘unreciprocated love’.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, Samson’s love for this woman also led him into a trap, one where he would lose the very sight which had drawn him into earlier traps laid by ‘unsuitable’ women.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, Delilah is categorised by her location, ‘in the valley of Sorek’ (נַחַל שֹׂרֵק), rather than by her ethnicity or nationality. The valley of Sorek (‘valley of red grapes’)<sup>56</sup> is a large flood bed region running from the hill country of Judah and Dan, through northern Philistia, to the Mediterranean coast. Klein thus associates Delilah with the uncontrolled torrents of the flood bed and the pleasant but dangerous loss of control identified with wine, ‘both strongly suggestive of overwhelming passions’.<sup>57</sup> Block regards the hilltop near Hebron to which Samson carried the gates of Gaza (Judg. 16.3) as ‘a foil against which to read this event’.<sup>58</sup> Rather than loving a ‘safe’ Israelite woman from the high country of Hebron, Samson once again chooses the danger of dating a ‘foreign’ woman from the lowlands.

Finally, and uniquely for a woman in the Samson story, Delilah (דִּלְיָה) is named. Segert observes that ‘there are few names in the Hebrew bible for which so many and so different etymologies have been proposed’.<sup>59</sup> One favoured possibility cites the Arabic word *dalla*, meaning ‘flirtatious’.<sup>60</sup> Another credible suggestion is based on the Hebrew noun דָּלָה which describes long ‘hanging’ hair in Song

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<sup>54</sup> Crenshaw, *Samson*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>55</sup> Schneider, *Judges*, p. 204. Also note my earlier comments concerning the Timnite woman.

<sup>56</sup> The term ‘sorek’ (שֹׂרֵק) is connected with a high quality grape vine (Isa. 5.2; Jer. 2.21). See Stanislav Segert, ‘Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII-XVI’, *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 454-461 (458).

<sup>57</sup> Lillian R. Klein, ‘The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women’, in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (FCB, 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 55-71 (61).

<sup>58</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 453.

<sup>59</sup> Segert, ‘Paronomasia’, p. 460.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Boling, *Judges*, p. 248 and Segert, ‘Paronomasia’, p. 460.

7.5 (MT 7.6).<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the most evocative possibility is that Delilah is a pun based on לילה, thus meaning ‘of the night’.<sup>62</sup> Despite Brettler’s confidence that wisdom themes are ‘absent’ from Judges 16,<sup>63</sup> this last interpretation effectively links Delilah to the forbidden woman of Prov. 7.9 who traps men ‘at the time of night and darkness’. Although most of these etymologies indicate that Delilah’s name is of Hebrew origin, this appears inconsistent with the presumption that she was a Philistine. Indeed, Exum notes that ‘only a few commentators raise the possibility that Delilah ... might be Israelite’.<sup>64</sup> However, is it likely that an Israelite woman would have betrayed Samson to the Philistines? Klein avoids etymological speculation and is confident that Delilah is a Philistine, ‘possibly a heroine to her own people, who perpetrates an age-old and repugnant ruse: using a man’s love to bring him down’.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Seduction of Samson*

If Judg. 16.4 sets the stage for the following account, v. 5 sets the agenda. Samson has become such a serious menace that the five ‘lords’ (סרניים) of the Philistine Pentapoltitan cities unite in a conspiracy to trap him.<sup>66</sup> Their strategy involved engaging the services of Delilah to ‘seduce’ Samson to reveal the secret of his strength. As Block observes, just as the Philistines had earlier used Samson’s bride to ‘entice’ from him the secret of his riddle (14.15), they now plan to use Delilah to ‘uncover the answer to the riddle of his person’.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> BDB, ‘דִּלְיָה’, p. 195. Although דִּלְיָה can also mean ‘poor’ (i.e. ‘weak’), any suggestion that Delilah was a submissive woman is unsupported by the biblical text.

<sup>62</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 454.

<sup>63</sup> Brettler, *Judges*, p. 56.

<sup>64</sup> Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> Klein, ‘Paradigm and Deviation’, p. 66.

<sup>66</sup> סרניים designates the five rulers of the Philistine Pentapolis: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Gaza (Josh. 13.3; Judg. 3.3). See H.J. Katzenstein, ‘Philistines: History’, *ABD*, V, pp. 326-328 (326).

<sup>67</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 454.

I have already associated elements of the Samson story with a countertestimony of the hiddenness of Yahweh based on links with wisdom theology. However, a less benign theme of countertestimony is also apparent in Samson's entrapment by both the Timnite woman and Delilah. In each episode, the Philistines commanded the woman to 'entice'/'seduce' Samson using the piel imperative form of the verb פתה. The Timnite woman was told to 'entice [פתה] your husband to tell us what the riddle is' (Judg. 14.15 ESV). Delilah was similarly instructed to 'seduce [פתה] him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him' (16.5 ESV).

Brueggemann highlights the use of the verb *htp* by the prophet Jeremiah in a passionate complaint against Yahweh: 'O LORD, you have deceived me [פתה], and I was deceived [פתה]' (Jer. 20.7 ESV). He uses this text as an example of Israel's countertestimony, as evidence that 'Yahweh is *abusive* on occasion'.<sup>68</sup> Brueggemann believes that this 'extraordinary' reference to Yahweh suggests that 'Yahweh has been dishonest, has misrepresented or misled in order to have Yahweh's way'.<sup>69</sup> He further observes that פתה contains sexual overtones and that it is even used elsewhere to refer to 'manipulative or violent sexual exploitation ... wherein the proposed sexual partner is either taken by deception or is forcibly seized'.<sup>70</sup> Brueggemann specifically includes Judg. 14.15 and 16.5 as examples of such texts.<sup>71</sup> I propose that these episodes, where women trap Samson by manipulative and deceptive sexual seduction as part of Yahweh's plan for his life, provide another facet of countertestimony in this story. This somewhat disturbing countertestimony bears witness to Yahweh's further abuse of Samson's personal liberty.

Whereas in Judges 14 the the Philistines had employed blackmail to engage the Timnite woman in their plot, here they offer Delilah a

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<sup>68</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 359, italics original.

<sup>69</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 360.

<sup>70</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 360.

<sup>71</sup> The other two examples Brueggemann uses are Exod. 22.16 (MT 22.15) and Job 31.9.

considerable financial incentive. Presuming that there were five Philistine lords who *each* promised her 1,100 shekels of silver (קֶסֶט), Delilah's reward for trapping Samson would have made her very wealthy. It surely cannot be coincidence that each Philistine lord promised Delilah as much silver as Micah later stole from his mother (Judg. 17.1-6). Indeed, Schneider rejects suggestions of textual error, arguing that Micah's mother could have been Delilah.<sup>72</sup> This possibility, though only implied by the text, suggests that the Danite migration of Judges 17-18 is intended to be read as the continuation of the Samson narrative.

### *The Binding of Samson*

The entrapment theme in the Samson narrative is emphasised by repeated attempts to bind him (קָשָׁה) in Judges 15 and 16. From the Philistine point of view, binding Samson to deprive him of his freedom is the inevitable consequence he must suffer for causing them so much misery. The binding subplot begins in Judg. 15.10, where the Philistines 'come up to bind Samson' and concludes in Judg. 16.21, where the Philistines finally seized Samson and 'bound him with bronze shackles'. In between these framing verses we read how Samson was restrained four times, once by the men of Judah (15.13) and three times by Delilah (16.8, 12a, 14a).<sup>73</sup> However, these attempts to secure Samson all failed and on each occasion he easily broke free (15.14; 16.9, 12b, 14b).

Samson's interest in the Timnite woman not only endangers himself but also traps the people of Judah when the Philistines came up to fight them at Lehi (Judg. 15.9). When asked to explain the reason for this incursion, the Philistines reply, 'We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us' (v. 10b). Samson's response, 'As they did to me, so have I done to them' (v. 11b), echoes the

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<sup>72</sup> Schneider, *Judges*, pp.231-232.

<sup>73</sup> Although the text specifies that Delilah 'bound' Samson twice (Judg. 16.8, 12a), her action in v. 14a of weaving his hair into the web of the loom was in response to her stated desire to 'bind' him (v. 13) and had the same restraining effect as binding him.

wisdom-literature interest in cause and effect. Brettler notes that this idea is explored using the same doubling of the verb עשה ('to do') in Prov. 24.29: 'Do not say, "I will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay the man back for what he has done"'.<sup>74</sup> Although Samson submitted to the Judahites and 'they bound him with two new ropes' (Judg. 15.13), when the Philistines came to claim their prisoner, the spirit of Yahweh empowered Samson to break free and go on a killing spree (vv. 14-17). Although Yahweh provided Samson with the means of escape and revenge, as Matthews observes, 'freedom from bondage here does not include freedom from God's design'.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, this was merely the first of the sequence of binding episodes inexorably drawing Samson towards the climax of his mission as Yahweh's agent against the Philistines.

After making her deal with the Philistine lords, Delilah set to work. Matthews describes the process by which she trapped Samson as a 'rhetorical contest', initiated by her bold question: 'Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound [אסר], to humble you' (Judg. 16.6).<sup>76</sup> However, Samson thwarts this, and her two further attempts to bind him, by means of three deceptions.

Samson deliberately misled Delilah three times concerning the means by which he could be weakened and thus 'be like any other man' (Judg. 16.7, 11, 13). He first deceived her by claiming that he could be restrained by 'seven fresh bowstrings [יִרְיָוֹת] that have not been dried' (v. 7).<sup>77</sup> However, Samson responded by easily snapping these cords (v. 9). His second trick was to tell Delilah that he could be bound with 'new ropes [עֲבָרִים] that have not been used' (v. 11). However, this was the method previously used by the Judahites in Judg. 15.13-14 and the outcome here was similar: 'he broke them off his arms like a thread' (16.12). Samson's third deception was to tell Delilah to 'weave the seven locks of [his] head into the web of the

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<sup>74</sup> Brettler, *Judges*, p. 52.

<sup>75</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, p. 153.

<sup>76</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, p. 160.

<sup>77</sup> יָרָר may mean cord (rope or sinew), bowstring (Ps. 11.2), tent-cord (Job 4.21); BDB, 'יָרָר', p. 452.

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loom' (v. 13).<sup>78</sup> As Block comments, 'now he is really playing with fire, since his hair represents the key to the riddle of Samson'.<sup>79</sup> Despite courting disaster, when Samson awoke he simply pulled out the pin and again freed himself (v. 14).

Clearly frustrated by her three failures to subdue Samson, Delilah resorted to a combination of emotional blackmail, 'How can you say, "I love you," when your heart is not with me?' and a return to her original question, 'you have not told me where your great strength lies' (Judg. 16.15). Indeed, Delilah nagged Samson until, rather ominously, 'his soul was vexed to death' (v. 16). Under this pressure his will was finally broken and 'he told her all his heart' (v. 17a). So, after being lulled by the uniform pattern of three deceptions, events are suddenly brought to an unexpected conclusion. Blenkinsopp considers that this evidence of an intentional '3+1 structure' means that this part of Judges 16 may be included among 'some of the best examples of OT literary art'.<sup>80</sup>

In Judg. 16.17b Samson discloses his lifelong Nazirite status to Delilah and for the first time the text connects this, his uncut hair and his strength:

A razor has never come upon my head,  
for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb.  
If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me,  
and I shall become weak and be like any other man.

In this startling revelation, the turning point of Samson's life, we witness a decisive shift of power from the 'strong' man to the 'weak' woman. Smith observes that, for Samson, 'knowledge is power' and when he shares this knowledge then power passes to his enemies,

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<sup>78</sup> The Hebrew MT of Judg. 16.13 is incomplete and is generally restored using the LXX.

<sup>79</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 458.

<sup>80</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, 'Structure and Style in Judges 13-16', *JBL* 82 (1963), pp. 65-76 (74-75).



since they are able to use it to subdue him.<sup>81</sup> By divulging his divine secret Samson was now comprehensively trapped, ironically by losing a ‘rhetorical contest’ reminiscent of the riddle challenge he had earlier used to trap his unfaithful Timnite bride.

Delilah then delivers Samson, the former wild man of nature, over to the urban Philistines.<sup>82</sup> She is so confident that Samson has at last told the truth that the Philistine lords brought her ill-gotten reward. Somewhat suggestively, Delilah then ‘made him sleep on her knees’ (Judg. 16.19), thus demonstrating her power over Samson. Schneider draws a parallel here between the actions of Delilah and Jael (Judg. 4.17-22; 5.24-27).<sup>83</sup> Both of these women turned on a strong man who they had lulled to sleep in a false sense of security. However, Schneider recognises the crucial difference that while Jael’s murder of Sisera symbolised Israelite victory, Delilah’s subjugation of Samson marked a defeat for Israel’s last judge. While Samson slept, Delilah shaved off his hair (16.19).<sup>84</sup> Exum notes that Samson is passive during both his consecration as a Nazirite before birth (ch. 13) and now as the key symbol of his Nazirite status is removed while he slept.<sup>85</sup> Samson was trapped into Nazirite service by Yahweh and now his Nazirite obligation ends in a trap laid by a woman, both occurring without his knowledge or consent.

After Samson’s haircut we are immediately told that ‘his strength left him’ (Judg. 16.19), although Samson only became aware of this later. Presumably he did not really believe that his strength would depart if his hair was cut, as he expected to be able to go out as

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<sup>81</sup> Carol Smith, ‘Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?’, *JSOT* 76 (1997), pp. 45-57 (51).

<sup>82</sup> Gregory Mobley notes the similarities between the Samson-Delilah story and the account of the humanisation of the wild man Enkidu in the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic; *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2005), pp. 193-194.

<sup>83</sup> Schneider, *Judges*, p. 223.

<sup>84</sup> The MT clearly reads וַתִּגְלַח (‘and she shaved’). Other Hebrew manuscripts read וַיִּגְלַח (‘and he shaved’), causing some to debate whether Delilah or her male accomplice actually shaved Samson.

<sup>85</sup> Exum, ‘Theological Dimension’, p. 44.

before and shake himself free (v. 20). Although Samson had now broken the only Nazirite obligation imposed on him by the angel (13.5), he seems to trust that, as before, Yahweh will continue to guarantee him strength.<sup>86</sup> However, the narrator now reveals the tragic reality that Samson 'did not know that Yahweh had left him' (16.20). Exum believes that the theological significance of this delayed revelation is to emphasise that 'the source of Samson's strength is Yahweh, and not his unshorn locks'.<sup>87</sup> Although Yahweh himself had selected Samson to be his agent against the Philistines, Samson had now been deserted and abandoned to his fate. Perhaps this is Yahweh's ultimate abuse of Samson.

The Philistines now grasped their opportunity to seize Samson, gouging out his eyes and imprisoning him in Gaza (Judg. 16.21). Block observes how the many ironies in Samson's life have come to fruition:

Overnight this man is transformed from one whose life is governed by sight and whose actions are determined by what is right in his own eyes into a blind man with eyes gouged out. ... Overnight a man with the highest conceivable calling, the divinely commissioned agent of deliverance for Israel, is cast down to the lowest position imaginable: grinding flour for others in prison.<sup>88</sup>

A remarkable parallel to Samson's fate may be found in Jer. 52.11, which describes Zedekiah's treatment by Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>89</sup> Like Samson, Zedekiah's eyes were put out, he was bound in bronze fetters and then put into 'the house of the mill' (LXX: οἰκίαν μύλωνος). In subjecting Samson to such punishment, the Philistines were in fact following accepted Mesopotamian practice towards

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<sup>86</sup> David M. Gunn, 'Samson of Sorrows: An Isaianic Gloss on Judges 13-16', in Danna Nolan Fewell (ed.), *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 225-253 (245).

<sup>87</sup> Exum, 'Theological Dimension', p. 43.

<sup>88</sup> Block, *Judges*, p. 462.

<sup>89</sup> cf. 2 Kgs 25.7; Jer. 39.7.

prisoners of war. Van der Toorn argues that Samson's fate was not exceptional by such standards, as cuneiform inscriptions describe large numbers of defeated enemies being constrained to do menial grinding work, often after having been blinded.<sup>90</sup> By forcing prisoners to grind in 'milling houses' (*bīt asīrī*, equivalent to the Hebrew *bēt hā<sup>n</sup>sīrīm*) they were humiliated by being given work traditionally assigned to slaves and women. Samson had earlier used trickery and strength to avoid capture at Gaza when he visited the prostitute there, but now he was returning as an impotent and humbled prisoner.

This looks like the end for our hero. Surely the weakened and blinded Samson can no longer play an effective role as Yahweh's agent against the Philistines? However, the narrator skilfully interjects again, hinting at further unexpected developments by making the self-evident but pregnant observation: 'But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved' (Judg. 16.22). Crenshaw, making a play on the meaning of Samson's name, comments: 'With one sweep of his brush, the artist has extinguished ominous clouds with the sun's radiance. Samson, the solar one, will rise again.'<sup>91</sup> We are encouraged to read on, to discover how Samson will make his escape from this seemingly hopeless situation in order that he might fulfill his divine mission to begin to save Israel from the Philistines (13.5).

### *Conclusion*

The story of Samson's adult life is not, as often suggested, primarily a description of how he repeatedly broke the conditions of a Nazirite vow. Instead, it demonstrates theological countertestimony expressed within the framework of sexual entrapment. Samson's 'mixed' marriage to the Timnite woman, his one-night stand with the Gaza prostitute and his unreciprocated love for Delilah all demonstrate how Yahweh (ab)used these women as successive

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<sup>90</sup> K. van der Toorn, 'Judges XVI 21 in the Light of the Akkadian Sources', *VT* 36 (1986), pp. 248-253 (249).

<sup>91</sup> Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 97.

honeytraps to ensnare Samson. Yahweh enabled Samson to escape from these traps to provide a series of 'opportunities' for him to act unwittingly as Yahweh's agent against the Philistines (Judg. 14.4). The wisdom-literature theme that I have identified in Samson's adult life acts as countertestimony of the hiddenness of Yahweh in these events. However, there is also evidence of a more overtly abusive form of countertestimony where the Timnite woman and Delilah 'entice'/'seduce' Samson. Although Yahweh eventually permitted the Philistines to trap Samson, their victory was to be short-lived, as Samson's imprisonment provided the setting for his key role in Yahweh's climactic entrapment of three thousand Philistines and their god, Dagon (16.23-31).

Christian interpretation has traditionally been uncomfortable with the images of God revealed in Israel's countertestimony and has occasionally even skewed the biblical message in order to suppress them in favour of core testimony. Indeed, Brueggemann states that:

the Only One of Israel is not innocently 'omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient', as too much Christian theology has insisted, but is a God present with and absent from, a God to be praised in full adoration and assaulted as an abuser.<sup>92</sup>

The countertestimony model that I have used to study Samson has revealed evidence of Yahweh's hiddenness and abuse. Surely the coexistence of these facets of God's character alongside his undoubted 'steadfast love' (חסד) invites us to reassess our view of God. Far from an exercise in deconstruction, recognising the diversity of God's personality can help to deepen our faith through increased understanding of his nature.

This episode of the Samson narrative reveals that Yahweh used unholy means and unholy people to further his holy purposes.

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<sup>92</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 'Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern', in Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky (eds.), *Jews, Christians and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (SBL Symposium Series, 8; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), pp. 97-108 (104).

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Yahweh used honeytraps to sexually ensnare Samson in order that he could use Samson to exact his holy vengeance against the Philistines and their god Dagon. Moreover, God continues to use ordinary people as his instruments against rival deities of our age, for example, materialism and love of power. Just as God used Samson, the 'wild man', he uses us today, in spite of and even because of our shortcomings.

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