NOTES AND READINGS

Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)

ma che una femminella habbia possanza
di condurti agli errori,
non è colpa di Rege, o Semideo.
E un misfatto plebeo.

Monteverdi, *Poppea*, I, ix

The scene which interests me is found in Judges 16.[1] Delilah means to barter the secret of Samson's strength for enormous sums of money. She tries to coax it out of her lover; and even when leading her falsely, Samson is getting her nearer the truth. He easily snaps the fresh bowstrings which are supposed to keep him bound (Delilah may have hoped that there was magic in the freshness of the ropes or rather in the number of bowstrings—seven, the same as the sum of his hairlocks). He then similarly treats the unused ropes. She presses on, and this time he enjoins her to manipulate his hair, the source of his strength: were she to weave his hair—we can't really figure how—he would lose his power. She does; but he, of course, does not. Yet she has only to ask one more time before the terrible mystery is hers to solve. At verses 19–20, we turn to three recent translations of the Hebrew:

New English Bible	Nevi'im (JPS2)	Anchor Bible
She lulled him to sleep on her knees, summoned a man and he shaved the seven locks of his hair for her. She began to take him captive and his strength left him. Then she cried, "the Philistines are upon you, Samson!" He woke from his sleep. . . .	She lulled him to sleep on her lap. Then she called in a man, and she had him cut the seven locks of his head; thus she weakened him and made him helpless; his strength slipped away from him. She cried, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" And he awoke from his sleep. . . .	She put him to sleep with his head on her lap and called to the man. She snipped off the seven braids of his head. Then she began to torment him; his strength had left him. When she said, "Philistines are upon you, Samson!" he awoke from his sleep . . .

PROOFTEXTS 8 (1988): 333–346

Most of the other English renderings offer minor variations to these examples. Let's look at how each differs in the various phrases. NEB and Nevi'im agree in how they translate the first phrase, וַתְּיַשְּׁנֵהוּ עַל־בִּרְכֶּיהָ. NEB is too literal with "knees," perhaps, but since it is not likely that anyone would imagine Delilah falling on *her* knees, begging Samson to fall asleep, the translation should not cause problems. AB, however, worries about the reader's comprehension and adds "with his head on her lap."

The verb ישן to sleep, does not take a direct object and it operates as an adjectival verb, that is, it tells you about the condition of the subjects rather than about the action they take. When such verbs are conjugated in the D-stem (*piel*), they often acquire a factitive quality, allowing the subject to control the action, but the action itself affects another. Although the D-stem of ישן is unique to our passage, its meaning is not difficult to gauge: "Delilah brought Samson to sleep." While the passage tells us where Samson fell asleep, עַל־בִּרְכֶּיהָ, it does not necessarily explain *how* Delilah managed her feat. The LXX (Septuagint) apparently knew how, for its reading presupposes a בֵּין־בִּרְכֶּיהָ (unattested to in the MT [Masoretic Text]) which, because it is reminiscent of בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ of the famous Yael and Sisera episode (Jud. 5:27), can suggest a post-coital torpor. עַל־בִּרְכֶּיהָ, however, is where the Shunnamite placed her sick child (2 Kings 4:20) and the circumstance here is sexually innocent. I do not want to imply that Delilah rocked Samson to a Philistine version of Brahms' lullaby; but I think that the phrase וַתְּיַשְּׁנֵהוּ עַל־בִּרְכֶּיהָ poses a problem that requires further elaboration.

It is commonly assumed that Delilah is, if not a prostitute, at least a courtesan. But the text has little to say about this. We don't even know whether she is Philistine or not, for the Sorek valley edged Danite and Philistine territories. Her name, whatever its meaning, follows excellent Semitic construction. We presume that the storyteller does not want us to think her Hebrew, but only because Samson is destined to choose only foreigners (14:4). It is true that Samson was involved with a Gaza prostitute in the episode just preceding (16:1–4). On that occasion, however, we are not told of Samson's feeling towards the woman; he seems to have sought her purely to gratify his sexual urge. The visit was all business, lasted until midnight and was probably not repeated. However, this particular scene served the storyteller well, for it allowed him to relate one more anecdote about Samson's strength. Samson's feelings towards women proves to be shallow even in that dolorous and drawn-out occasion when he sought to marry a Timna woman. To his parents, he confides only that "I find her attractive יָשְׁרָה בְעֵינָי כִּי־הִיא; (14:3, and also 7)."[2] Nothing profounder than sexual drive ever binds Samson to his wife and "love," the emotion, is neither directed to someone nor is it reciprocated; it is cited only when the woman from Timna accuses Samson of lacking it (14:16).

When involved with Delilah, however, Samson *is* in love, and befitting this unique display of his feeling, Delilah is the only woman in the Samson narratives to bear a name (even Samson's mother is nameless). Now, surprising as it may seem, when applied to human beings, the vocabulary for love—that is the root *aheb* and its derivatives—is used very sparingly in Hebrew narratives. Moreover, its terminology is not homogeneous in usage. Isaac and Rebeccah, Jacob and Rachel and Elkanah and Hannah are the only married couples

wherein husbands are said to harbor love for their spouses. Jacob, of course, loved Rachel as soon as he saw her and Michal loved David at first sight too, but with less than happy results. Ahasuerus and Rehoboam, respectively, are said to love Esther and Maacah more than other women. Solomon loved many, but apparently not one with devotion. We have two occasions in which love led to abuse of women: when Hamor loved Dinah, and when Amnon harbored a passion for his sister.[3] Samson's love for Delilah never has a chance to find a full response, for she is but an instrument in a game in which God had something to prove.

The storyteller's readiness to betray the intensity of Samson's feeling for Delilah, however, allows us better to set the scene in which Samson finally gives up his secret. Unlike the previous occasions in which time was either too diffuse (Samson and the woman from Timna) or without consequence to the action (Samson and the whore of Gaza), once Delilah is commissioned by the Philistines to uncover Samson's secret, all subsequent relationship between them occurs within the selfsame day. In the first two instances where Samson leads Delilah astray, the story does not even bother to tell us whether he is asleep or not. It may be that he closes his eyes long enough for the Philistines to hand Delilah what she needs, but the storyteller evidently does not think it necessary to share with us further information on Samson's wakefulness and the Philistines are not brought back on stage until after Samson is shaved. Even during the third episode, when the LXX found it necessary to speak of Samson's sleep, the Hebrew text says only that Samson awakens to find his hair woven.

As Delilah strives once more to discover his secret, we learn why the storyteller needed to tell us of Samson's love. Contrasting the earlier episode where Samson is accused of harboring hate rather than love for the woman from Timna, on this occasion Delilah can refer to love as an emotion that is indeed Samson's. "How can you say, 'I love you,'" she protests, "when you do not confide in me?" The text tells us that Delilah repeats her plea כָּל־הַיָּמִים which is usually translated, "every day," "daily," or "day after day." This is presumably because of the Timna circumstance that is deemed parallel (14:17–18). But כָּל־הַיָּמִים merely refers to an act that is repeated regularly, regardless of how long the repetition takes before it ends (see BDB 400, 7,f); it could take months; it could end in minutes. In fact, it is a much better scene to have Delilah harping on this accusation over one afternoon than to have it spread over days or weeks. I offer two arguments to bolster this opinion, one internal to the story, the other comparative.

When Delilah addresses Samson for the first time, she rephrases the Philistines' request, without noticing how incongruous such words are when addressed to a lover. The request includes three separate components: 1. "what makes you strong?" 2. "what would bind you?" 3. "so that you could be weakened." These three elements are never brought together again in any of the subsequent queries. Thus, in the second and third episodes only "what would bind you?" appears, while the fourth features only "what makes you strong?" Yet each one of Samson's responses (but the third which is highly apocopated[4]) requires us to presume all three components as *sous-entendues*. Such a presumption is most natural if there is temporal unity to our scene.

The second argument requires me to turn to one of two demotic tales relating the adventures of prince Setne Khamwas and his son Si-Osiris: "Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah."[5] I need not detail the various episodes in which this prince tries to find ultimate secrets in hidden books (some of which probably inspired Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), but in one of his many adventures, Setne falls in violent lust for Tabubu. Daughter of the prophet of Bastet though she may be, the woman is actually for hire, but at the highest price. Tabubu does not surrender to Setne, but at successive moments demands from him his fortune, his property, and finally, the death of his own children. The sordid depth to which Setne sinks when seeking Tabubu's favor is brilliantly portrayed; but his condition acquires poignancy because it all happens in one evening's surrender to passion.

Setne is spared facing the consequences of his own obsession, because Tabubu, it turns out, is but a nightmare. It is otherwise for Samson who, once he discloses his God-ordained secret to Delilah, has to face a reality that is all too horrible. To her who had accused him of not confiding in her (וְלִבְּךָ אֵין אִתִּי) he tells everything (וַיַּגֶּד־לָהּ אֶת־כָּל־לִבּוֹ), radically altering his own future.

The translations which I give above begin to fidget at this point. As is common to Hebrew narrative style, if subjects are to control more than one verb in a single scene, they are most often made to control a sequence of three verbs. This must have been the Masorites' own feeling about our passage, for they punctuated verse 19a accordingly: they broke it into three distinct parts, placing major disjunctive accents (Zaqeph qaton), each over בִּרְכֶּיהָ and אִישׁ and then a major verse divider (Atnah) under רֹאשׁוֹ. (I shall come back to the rest of the verse presently.) NEB's translation is here least committed to this tripling rule: Delilah lulls Samson to sleep and summons a man who, in turn, becomes the subject of the third (emended) verb. Delilah returns as subject in 19b. Nevi'im (JPS2) has her lulling Samson to sleep, then calling in a man whom she has cut Samson's hair. AB has Delilah putting Samson to sleep and calling a man who is left with nothing to do, for Delilah ends up wielding the razor. AB, however, is the most faithful to the Hebrew.

The Hebrew reads: וַתִּקְרָא לְאִישׁ וַתְּגַלַּח אֶת־שֶׁבַע מַחְלְפוֹת רֹאשׁוֹ and we need to look at the second verb before coming back to the first. *Legalleaḥ* occurs only in the D (Piel) and HtD (Hithpael) stems. In the D, it most often controls a direct object, but once it is reflexive (Genesis 41:14). In the absence of scissors in the ancient Near East, razors are commonly used, and hence it would be more accurate to render by "shaving" or "cutting" the hair rather than "snipping" it, although we are not required to imagine Delilah lovingly soaping the hair before running her blade on the scalp.[6] What is important to note is that in all of its occurrences, the verb never bears a causative or even factitive meaning, hence if there is shaving to be done, it must be by Delilah. It is of course possible to emend the verbal form into **wayyegallaḥ*. and thus have the man as subject; but this would be a rather desperate measure to force the text into saying what we think happened in the story. It is also possible to revocalize into a causative stem (**wattagleaḥ*.), in order to have Delilah make someone shave Samson; but the resulting form is not likely for this verb in Hebrew.

Therefore, Delilah must be given full responsibility for her act, and we should reject the renderings of NEB and Nevi'im. Once we do this, we are left in the AB's quandary, what to do with the man whom Delilah summons?

Now if there is a man to summon, we cannot pull him out from among the Philistines who are awaiting word that his strength is indeed gone. To begin with, the *language* is different. The word which has been used previously, *oreb*, is normally used in Hebrew to speak of a group of ambushers; here we are mentioning a single individual, אִישׁ. Furthermore, the *sequence* would be all wrong here. In the two previous occasions, these gentlemen are summoned *after* Delilah acts to neutralize Samson. Thus in verses 9–10, Delilah ties Samson with the bowstrings and, as the ambushers lie in wait, she awakes her lover. In verse 12, we again find Delilah calling to the ambushers after she binds Samson. Finally, to bring the man from among the Philistines in wait would compromise a minor motif within this chapter, which has to do with the distance the Philistines kept between themselves and Samson, even as they searched for instruments to physically control him. Because of the frequent drubbings Samson handed them, the Philistines have learned to be cautious. At every one of Delilah's three previous warnings to Samson about an imminent attack, no Philistine was ready to pounce on the *shackled* Samson. Therefore, we have reason to doubt that any of them would heroically break out from hiding in order to help Delilah shear an *unfettered* Samson.

In fact, there is reason to doubt that any throng of Philistines was close to Delilah's boudoir when she finally loosens the secret from Samson! To my mind, one of the more interesting aspects of Delilah's involvement with Samson is that her credibility with the Philistines progressively weakens even as her influence on Samson grows. While they are first to approach with promises of enormous fortunes and provide her with fresh bowstrings with which to bind Samson, Delilah is left to her own devices from then on. Perhaps they had come to doubt Delilah's success; it is more likely, however, that the narrator wants to sharpen our focus on the relationship between Samson and Delilah and has therefore resolved to leave the scene uncluttered. It is only after she is convinced of her own mastery of the situation that she sends for them and that the Philistines show up, money in hand; but this time around they do not necessarily stay close to their nemesis. In fact, even after he is shorn of his strength, Samson must be allotted this space in which to become aware of his impotence and the Philistines ought not intrude to spoil the discovery scene by their presence. They, in fact, come back into the foreground at verse 21.

Who is the man, then, that Delilah is calling? And what is he to do for her? Boling, who wrote the commentary on Judges for the AB series, is one of many who wonder whether the man brought her the razor or assisted her in cutting the hair. But what was he doing until that moment? Is he there to report on the weakening of Samson, or will he serve as punching-bag, alerting the others to Delilah's failure? Perhaps he was merely an acolyte to a Levantine *maithuna*, watching and serving the two as they made love? A kinky scene that has its merits, I must admit; but definitely one to waste the effort of a teller, who is normally parsimonious with characters without future.

My colleague Gary A. Herion, who subtly shades his appreciation of Scripture's literary quality, thinks that the narrator may be ambushing the reader by introducing a character unexpectedly. Plot becomes subordinate to effect as the audience is startled by the vocabulary for the unexpected presence;

and it is this response that the teller is seeking in order to better channel the attention towards Samson's predicament.

This might well be so, but I find the proposal overly subtle. My own inclination is to propose that the man, in fact, does not exist. The second of Delilah's acts is וַתִּקְרָא לָאִישׁ. In Hebrew, the verb קרא means to utter a sound; but to determine how that sound is functioning, a preposition is needed to control that verb. True, when the preposition *le-* is involved, the resulting idiom does mean "to summon"; but it can also mean merely to shout to someone. In our passage, this someone is given to us as אִישׁ, "man." The Masorites have vocalized the word as לָאִישׁ, "to *the* man," and not to "a(ny) man," (**le'is*). This "man" therefore is not referring to an unknown person, but has as antecedent the series of pronominal suffixes alluding to the only male who is featured in our story: Samson himself.[7] In Hebrew such a distribution of nouns and antecedents is not syntactically obtuse; but it may help us recognize the structure better if we transpose אִישׁ and the third person masculine singular pronominal suffix that occurs last: וַתַּיְשֵׁן אֶת־רֹאשׁ וַתִּקְרָא לוֹ* etc. . . .

Delilah, in sum, shouts at Samson; and reassured by how deeply he sleeps, she wields the razor.[8]

A few more words remain to be said about the rest of the sentence. וַתָּחֶל לְעַנּוֹתוֹ serves to bind Judges 16 into a whole, and the verbal form need not be emended (as proposed by Nevi'im and others). לְעַנּוֹתוֹ runs through the Delilah episode and we first meet with it when the Philistines declare their intention to imprison and abuse Samson. It is picked up by Delilah and serves as the third component of her initial query. This twofold repetition within two verses serves the narrator well, for it allows him to comment on the degree that a lovestruck Samson foolishly refuses to be warned about Delilah. The masculine version of the form ויחל occurs in 22, allowing us an insight not available to Samson during his long gestation in a Philistine prison: Even as Delilah is shearing Samson's hair, God has decided to restore him to grace. Therefore, by following the Masoretic punctuation, I arrive at this rendering of the passage:

> Bringing him to sleep on her lap, she called to the man [Samson], then began to cut the seven braids on his hair. Delilah started to weaken him, and his strength slipped away from him. When she yelled, "Philistines are attacking you, Samson," he shook off his sleep and thought, "This time too, I will come out of this by breaking free," obviously not realizing that God had turned away from him.
>
> The Philistines seized him and gouged his eyes out; they brought him to Gaza and chained him with bronze fetters. In prison, he became a grinder of grain. But his hair started to grow as he was being shaved.

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NOTES

1. I have benefitted from reading Ya'ir Zakovitch's Hebrew study, *The Life of Samson (Judges 13–16). A Critical-Literary Analysis* (Jerusalem, 1982).

2. In suggesting answers for "the Riddle of Samson" (*Prooftexts*, 1[1981]:249), E. L. Greenstein argues that the idiom at stake here does not refer to sexual attractiveness, but to proper conduct, and is meant as an instance of Samson's attraction to alien cultures. The scene, therefore, is symbolic of Israel's constant straying toward the foreign. This may well be so, for the theme is strong in Hebrew literature. Note how Joseph leads Israel into even more tragic situations (exile in Egypt) even when the foreign woman he chooses to marry is a High Priest's daughter. David gets stuck with Bathsheba, wife to a Hittite (i.e., Syrian), producing a son who initiates Israel's division. Other examples abound.

However, I think it possible to understand our expression on more than one level, and I have retained a rendering that is much more relevant to the immediate context. Therefore, while Samson has sexual attractiveness in mind, his parents (and we) think only of liaisons which cannot be proper.

3. Except for the Rehoboam-Maacah relationship which is cited in 2 Chron. (11:21), the other episodes are too well-known to merit full citation.

Worth noting here is that Maacah is regarded as Absalom's daughter. Now another daughter of Absalom, Tamar, is remembered as "a beautiful woman" (2 Sam. 14:27). This bit of information appears to me as vestigial of a more elaborate account. It may well be that another version of the Amnon-Tamar story once circulated, one in which David's son Amnon rapes Absalom's *daughter* Tamar, resulting in Absalom's murderous ire against his brother. Such a version of the story would make it clear why Tamar could tell Amnon that marriage is possible between them, for a union between uncles and nieces is permitted among the Hebrews. This version also explains why David does not immediately punish Amnon (the rape of an *unmarried* niece is a crime that can be legally resolved through marriage) and why he does not punish Absalom for Amnon's murder (the anger of a *father* under this circumstance is understandable).

The familiar version in 2 Samuel, however, had powerful appeal, for it features a David who is impotent against the intrigues within his family.

4. LXX is fuller here, and most renderings use it to expand on the Hebrew text. It may not be necessary, however, and I suggest the following translation, "Why don't you weave the seven braids on my head?" The direction Samson gives Delilah is sufficiently clear.

5. Translation in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, III: *The Late Period* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 127–51. Many commentators refer to three other Hebrew stories which speak of women taking revenge on men: Yael and Sisera, Esther and Haman, and Judith and Holophernes. To my mind the motifs in each differ from each other, let alone from the story of Samson and Delilah. Moreover, while a case can be made that all three share a similar point of view (neutralizing an enemy), these narratives cannot be compared with regard to the perspective that informs our story.

6. But it is recreated in just such a way on pp. 193–94 of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky's novel *Judge and Fool*, a barely disguised allegory of British rule in Palestine. Jabotinsky regarded Samson's hair as symbolic of Israel's confidence in the forces of truth and justice, and this perception influenced Cecil B. DeMille's film realization of 1949. The novel itself is published also under the title *Samson, the Nazirite*, but most recently reissued as *Samson* (Johannesburg, 1976).

7. Limiting the search for parallel usage to the book of Ruth, we can note that the narrator (at 3:08) and the characters (2:20, 3:03 and twice in 3:16–18) refer to אִישׁ, with Boaz as the declared antecedent.

8. Which is exactly how Cecil B. De Mille saw it when, in his wonderful film, *Samson and Delilah* (1949), he left Delilah alone to earn her wages from the Philistines. As a bonus to biblical exegetes, De Mille has Delilah draw Samson's own dagger to do the job!