

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE LION AND THE BEES: ANOTHER IRONIC TWIST IN THE SAMSON CYCLE

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The use of symbolism has always been regarded as one of the hallmarks of classical Hebrew poetry. Symbolic features in narrative prose, however, are far more difficult to trace and are often more likely to be read into the text than to constitute an integral part of its makeup. This is different in the case of Samson's killing of a lion (Judg 14:6) and the subsequent surprising discovery that the carcass had become the hospice of a beehive (14:8). The aim of the present study, then, is to throw into relief the symbolic undercurrents of this remarkable account, particularly in relation to Samson's role as the one through whom Yahweh would "begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5). Consequently, the inclusion of the episode in the Samson cycle boasts greater significance than to authenticate the judge's high calling or to provide an initial "demonstration of Samson's strength, which the text says was from the deity."¹

I. DELIVERANCE ANTICIPATED

The Samson story holds a number of rather unique features in comparison with the other cycles in the book of Judges, notwithstanding those features that make it so much like other accounts of the careers of judge-figures.² Thus, even a cursory reading of the book will show that the story of the "last"³ of the judges is far more biographical in nature than any of the preceding episodes. Only the Samson cycle commences with a birth

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¹ Cf. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 204. In my opinion, the account has been notoriously underrated and is often given only cursory attention. Cf. Andrew R. Fausset, *Judges* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999) 227–228; James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 109; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 240; Terry L. Brensinger, *Judges* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1999) 152.

² For a discussion of shared motifs, see Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Almond, 1988) 128–132.

³ Of course, chronologically, Samson was not the last judge. But the author/editor placed the narrative at the end of the "book of deliverers" (3:7–16:31) because Samson's life epitomizes the shortcomings of the nation of Israel. As such, the Samson cycle affords a "worthy" conclusion to the main body of the document. Daniel I. Block aptly sums up the notion by claiming that "this man embodies/personifies all that is wrong in Israel" (*Judges, Ruth* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999] 429).

narrative,⁴ and that chapter 16 includes an account of Samson's death also sets the cycle apart as the only one that evokes the notion of a well-rounded story about a judge's life. It is in the birth narrative that we find the conspicuous angelic announcement, which itself is unprecedented in the book of Judges: ". . . The child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb. And he will begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5). These words point out right from the start that Samson, as a deliverer, would leave behind an incomplete legacy, and that someone else would have to finish his work. Yet, this being the case, the language also suggests that his exploits are in some sense precursory or anticipatory of acts to follow.

Now, it is clear from the books of Samuel that the final subjugation of the Philistines materialized under the leadership of Saul and especially David. The first two kings of Israel would finish what Samson had begun. That Saul should be understood as replicating and continuing Samson's struggles against the Philistines is quite evident from the correspondences between the portrayals of both leaders.⁵ In both cases, the main national enemy were the Philistines.⁶ The unique phrase *רוח ותצלח רוח אלהים/יהיה על* followed by the name of the Spirit's recipient is employed almost exclusively for these two characters (cf. Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6).⁷ Again, both are subjected to the Philistines' ridicule in the house of their idols (Judg 16:25; 1 Sam 31:4, 9–10) and terminate their lives by way of suicide (Judg 16:30; 1 Sam 31:4). These corresponding patterns are likely due to deliberate shaping on the part of the author/editor who saw Saul's significance in his being the (albeit tragic) successor of Samson's calling.

2 Sam 8:1 credits David with solving the Philistine problem and thus finishing Samson's work. But the connection between David and Samson—for all their differences in character—is also made explicit in another account, namely David's defeat of Goliath. It is hardly accidental that prior to his showdown with the giant he recounts the most amazing feat of killing a lion (and a bear [!]; cf. 1 Sam 17:34–36). The analogy between the lion and Goliath is particularly pronounced in 17:36: the lion is depicted as "being like" Goliath who acts as the champion for the Philistine host.

The lion's representative function also obtains for Judg 14:5–6.⁸ In fact, the reader is encouraged to see the lion attacking Samson as a "symbolic

⁴ Yairat Amit observes that in folk literature a birth narrative "serves as a characteristic opening for the biography of a hero" (*The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* [Leiden: Brill, 1999] 291).

⁵ I am indebted to Robert H. O'Connell's findings on this point (*The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* [Leiden: Brill, 1996] 295–296).

⁶ Although Saul also fought the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:6–9) and various other nations (cf. 1 Sam 14:47), the Philistines are depicted in 1 Samuel as posing the main threat to his kingdom.

⁷ 1 Sam 16:13 has David as the recipient of the Spirit. The text shows the identical phrase, except for the use of *אֵל* instead of *עַל*, which difference may be disregarded as insignificant. It is well known that these prepositions are often used interchangeably.

⁸ James B. Jordan makes this point, too, by calling the lion "a Philistine lion" (*Judges: God's War Against Humanism* [Tyler: Geneva Ministries, 1985] 247). However, he may take things too far when he maintains that as Samson "is the true sun to replace Beth-Shemesh, so he is the true

prelude” to Samson’s exploits against Philistia. The lion appears out of nowhere, almost as though Yahweh had summoned him for the occasion. The words of v. 4 underscore this notion: notwithstanding sinful human behavior, Yahweh is the real instigator “seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines.” The killing of the lion sets in motion a chain of events that leads to Samson’s posing of the riddle during the wedding at Timnah (14:12–18), which in turn begins another chain of reactions that culminates in the slaughter of the Philistines at Ramath-Lehi (15:14–19). The killing of the lion anticipates this slaughter.

Symbolic motifs are also at work in 14:8: “Some time later, when he [i.e. Samson] went back to marry her [i.e. the Timnite woman], he turned aside to look at the lion’s carcass. And behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the carcass of the lion.” We note first of all that we are confronted with a most extraordinary situation: bees are not known to settle in a carcass!⁹ That in this case they did, is almost as miraculous a feat as the killing of the lion itself. As Daniel Block notes, the sight “bears the signature of God.”¹⁰ Block is also the only commentator who draws attention to the unusual use of the word עֵדָה for the bee colony:

In a world of decay and decomposition Samson discovers a “community” of bees not only existing but producing sweetness to the world around. The narrator’s choice of *‘edâ*, “community,” rather than *seres*, the common word for “swarm” . . . is deliberate. Except for Ps 68:30 [Hb. 31], elsewhere *‘edâ* always refers to a company of people, usually the Israelites as a faith community, called to be agents of grace and light in the decadent world.¹¹

In view of Block’s observations regarding the term עֵדָה, it comes as somewhat of a disappointment that, according to Block, all the narrator aimed to achieve was to evoke a patently ironic image.¹² Irony is certainly at work here as elsewhere in the book of Judges, but I would argue that the narrator chose to employ the unusual word עֵדָה in this context precisely because he wanted the reader to be conscious of the typological significance of the sight (as he saw it) that presented itself to Samson. Samson had killed the beast with superhuman strength, just as Israel had been exhorted that her triumph would come about through the Lord’s presence among the Israelite warriors (cf. Lev 26:8; Deut 7:17–24). The conquest of Canaan would issue in Israel’s taking possession of her divinely allotted territory in order to

lion who defeats the false lion of Philistia. He is a picture of the Most Perfect Danite, the very Lion of God, Jesus Christ.” The Christological interpretation does not seem to be grounded in textual analysis.

⁹ In order to bypass putrefaction, the carcass would have to have dehydrated in an inconceivably short time, since bees do not live in such moist places as cadavers undergoing decomposition. Even if wind and heat in a Palestinian summer are judged sufficient to prevent decomposition, it is clear that the story does *not* “represent Samson’s discovery as an every-day occurrence.” Cf. George F. Moore, *Judges* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1918) 332.

¹⁰ Cf. Block, *Judges, Ruth* 429.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

enjoy the blessings of Yahweh's covenant. Accordingly, the divine blessing connected with Israel's peaceful existence in the land is often described in terms of the sweetness of honey: "For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land . . . a land of olives and honey" (Deut 8:7–8).

We have noted earlier that the lion's cadaver was an unlikely host for a "community" of bees. But so was Canaan for Israel. For although the promised land was introduced as a "good land" (see above), initially God's holy nation (cf. Exod 19:6) entered an "unclean" zone. When Israel set foot on their new homeland, they were to destroy all traces of idolatry, on account of which the land was "defiled" (cf. Lev 18:24–25, 27). Of course, the defilement of the land had to do with the uncleanness of the people who used to live in it, so that the ignominious state of the land could only be lifted by the death of its inhabitants (cf. Num 35:33). Like bees in a carcass, Israel was to inhabit a country of idolaters, a country that became habitable for God's community only through the death of God's enemies.

One may object that these links between the lion and the bees on the one hand and Israel's conquest/settlement in Canaan on the other are accidental. Did the author/editor really want this incident to be read as having typological qualities? The use of the word *ערה* and the conspicuous position of the killing of the lion in the narrative (i.e. the beginning of Samson's engagements with the Philistines, see above) by themselves cannot bear the weight of the argument for intentionality. More corroborating data is needed to confirm our claim.¹³

II. LITERARY AND THEMATIC PARALLELS BETWEEN 14:5–6, 8 AND 15:14–19

That the killing of the lion together with the sight of the cadaver hosting a beehive foreshadows Samson's exploits and—in a broader sense—the completion of) Israel's conquest of Canaan is made clear through deliberate parallels by which the language of 15:14–19 echoes the words and themes of 14:5–6, 8.¹⁴

¹³ Generally speaking, the presence of "narrative typology" in Biblical prose—though rare—is not altogether unprecedented. Rather, it is quite obvious that the authors of the historical books of the OT held the belief that certain events depicted in their writings foreshadowed and anticipated later events. For example, Gen 12:10–20 (cf. also Genesis 20 and 26) has been structured so as to prefigure Israel's sojourn in Egypt. In such cases, "the author wants to show that the events of the past are pointers to those of the future." Cf. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 38.

¹⁴ I do not intend to blur the evidence. Strictly speaking, it is true that the killing of the lion foreshadows the conquest and subjugation of *Philistine* territory. We should keep in mind, however, that David's victory over his western foes coincided with the completion of the conquest. All the other subsequent military engagements of David's army were directed against the *neighboring* nations (Edom, Ammon, Moab, Syria, cf. 2 Samuel 8) which, in the process of the confrontations, became vassal states to the Davidic kingdom. These nations are notably absent from the list of "death candidates" connected with the conquest of Canaan (cf. Gen 15:19–21). Therefore in a real sense the defeat of Philistia completed the conquest of Canaan.

First of all, we notice an obvious literary parallelism between the two passages that frame the first episode of the Samson cycle (14:1–15:20, not counting the birth narrative):

14:5–6	ויבאו עד־כרמי תמנתה	15:14	הוא־בא עד־לצהי
	והגה כפיר שאג לקראתו		ופלשתים הריעו לקראתו
	ותצלה עליו רוה יהוה		ותצלה עליו רוה יהוה

The repetition of particular words and phrases is conspicuous and invites the reader to compare the two accounts. In both cases, the narrator relates the sequence of events in terms of three steps: (1) Samson comes to a certain location;¹⁵ (2) the enemy roars/shouts upon meeting him; (3) the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon him with power. To this we may add the result of the Spirit's empowering Samson: he tears apart the lion/the ropes (14:6; 15:14).¹⁶ It is also striking that both accounts, in relating Samson's show of strength, draw attention to his *hands* (Heb. יד, cf. ומאומה אין בידו, 14:6; ומסו אסוריו מעל, ידיו, 15:14).

These parallels are not accidental. They are designed to lead the reader into seeing the killing of the lion as a symbolic prelude to Samson's confrontations with the Philistines, which reach their first climax at the end of chapter 15.

Additional thematic parallels lend further support to our reading. Commentators have pointed out that Samson violated the ritual Nazirite stipulations when he ate of the honey found in the carcass of the lion.¹⁷ Num 6:6 indicates that contact with a cadaver is defiling for a Nazirite.¹⁸ But we should keep in mind that Samson's Naziriteship was not an ordinary one. According to Numbers 6, Naziriteship was based on and initiated by the candidate's own volition (a Nazirite vow, cf. 6:2). This fundamental criterion does not apply in Samson's case, for he was a Nazirite by divine appointment, and his status as being "separated" was not temporary: he was to be "a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death" (Judg 13:7). Ceremonial defilement, therefore, did not effect the termination of his

¹⁵ The plural *ויבאו* in 14:5 is necessitated by the introduction of Samson's parents in the preceding verse. Yet it is clear from context (14:6) that they did not accompany their son when he entered the vineyards.

¹⁶ I interpret the language of 15:14 to relate the notion of Samson tearing apart the ropes on his arms, although the text's wording is somewhat ambiguous. It is certain, however, that the ropes fell off Samson's hands *as a result of* the Spirit "coming upon him with power." The Spirit is credited with imparting superhuman strength to the deliverer (14:6, 19; 15:14) for the very purpose of performing acts of perplexing power. Moreover, the idea of tearing apart ropes is consistent with some of Samson's other feats narrated in the cycle (cf. 16:3, 9, 14).

¹⁷ Cf. Brensinger, *Judges* 152; Block, *Judges, Ruth* 429; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges—An Integrated Reading* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 169.

¹⁸ Of course, by sharing the honey with his parents he also implicates his parents' ceremonial defilement (cf. Lev 11:24–25).

unique status, as was the case with the “ordinary” Nazirite (cf. Num 6:12). Samson served a life term as a Nazirite, and even when Yahweh abandoned him, the forfeiture of his superhuman powers, which were intimately tied up with his Naziriteship, was transitory (cf. Judg 16:20–22, 30). There is no indication that the meticulous rituals prescribed for the violation of the Nazirite vow (cf. Num 6:9–12) are of any concern to either God or Samson. Samson’s Naziriteship did not come to an end upon his defilement, nor did he have to undergo ritual observances in order to be reinstated to the former position.

Thus, the eating of the honey involves a certain paradox. Although the act results in ceremonial impurity, Samson remains a נזיר. Yahweh’s contribution in this episode is no less perplexing: Samson was not “told” to eat the honey, but the entire situation is orchestrated by God. If this seems overstated, we should remember that even the judge’s longing for the (ceremonially unclean) Timnite woman was—in a most puzzling way—“from Yahweh” (cf. 14:4). Alongside of Samson’s callous disregard for ceremonial purity, then, Yahweh too seems to operate outside of the scope of “orthodox” expectations.¹⁹

The above pattern may possibly be reflected in Yahweh’s deliverance at Ramath-Lehi (15:14–19), and it is surprising that no one has drawn attention to this. First, the slaughter of a thousand Philistines is brought about by the jawbone from a donkey’s “fresh” cadaver (cf. 14:3–4), which rendered the instrument unclean.²⁰ Then, after the slaughter, Samson faints for thirst and cries to God for help. In response, “God split open the hollow place (Heb. מכתש) which is in Lehi” (15:19a). The italicized phrase reads אשר-בלחי in MT. The perceptive reader will notice a certain level of ambiguity in the wording resulting from the pun on the root לחי. The word, of course, denotes “jawbone,” and although 15:19b clarifies that the word here is a shorthand for the name רמת לחי (cf. 15:17), one could be induced to interpret the above phrase in the following way: “God split open the hollow place which was near (or even “in”²¹) the jawbone.” This would imply that the water God caused to gush forth from the hollow place came in contact with, or even came *from* the polluted instrument of slaughter. As I indicated, 15:19b makes this reading quite unlikely.²² Nevertheless, could the (appar-

¹⁹ I do not wish to suggest that Yahweh is presented as an erratic or even capricious tyrant. But it remains that in the case of Samson he took the liberty of redefining the notion of Naziriteship in some way, while certain elements of his initial address to Samson’s mother (Judg 13:4–5) are heavily reminiscent of the language of Num 6:2–21 (cf. the laws of abstinence, 6:3–5). The reader (who may think he/she knows the laws that govern the Nazirite vow) must be prepared to accept the extraordinary character of the divinely appointed Naziriteship without insisting on a strict application of the laws of the Nazirite. One may call God’s involvement arbitrary, but then it is no more arbitrary than anything he does out of his own volition. That Samson’s status is not to be understood as being patterned precisely after the above mentioned stipulations, but stands “in its own right,” is already anticipated in the oracle of 13:5 and eventually confirmed in 13:7.

²⁰ Cf. Webb, *The Book of Judges* 169.

²¹ Note that the translators of the KJV fell into this “trap.”

²² Unless the author believed the jawbone still to be in place (i.e. “the well of him who called, which is near/in the jawbone until this day,” 15:19b), which is highly unlikely.

ent) ambiguity inherent in the language of 15:19a (i.e. לחי instead of רמת לחי) be intentional?

In answering this question in the affirmative, I would argue that 15:19a affords another link with the killing of the lion and the honey that Samson scooped out of the cadaver. The suggestive language of 15:19a with its pun on the term לחי may well be coined to echo the earlier account. Just as “sweetness *came forth from* (אֵץ + מֶן) the eater” (cf. Samson’s riddle, 14:4), so now life-giving water *came forth from* (אֵץ + מֶן) the hollow place in/at (the) לחי (15:19a). Even if the vague reference to לחי in 15:19a is read as a shorthand for Ramath-Lehi, the narrator makes explicit the close connection between the jawbone and the site from which the water flowed: the very name of the place (“hill/high place of the jawbone”) derived from the presence (and, consequently, the use) of the jawbone (cf. 15:17).²³ Again we see emerging the paradoxical concept of the hero’s imperturbability regarding ceremonial purity walking hand in hand with Yahweh’s unexpected lack of concern for ritual prescriptions for Nazirites.

Samson’s *drinking* of the water in this scene, then, seems to hark back to his *eating* of the honey earlier on and thus confirms the notion that the author saw the incident involving the lion as an omen of things to come. As an anticipation of Samson’s own victories over the Philistines and Israel’s settlement in Canaan under the leadership of Saul and David the killing of the lion has symbolic significance. Ironically, when Samson alluded to the event in the form of a riddle in order to pose the conundrum to the “wedding guests”²⁴ (cf. 14:10–14), he in effect foretold the Philistines what would happen to them. Samson would initialize Israel’s deliverance “out of the hands of the Philistines” (13:5), and in time Israel would take full possession of Canaan, as the bees did of the lion’s cadaver. Although the bodyguards did not comprehend the typology, it was the disclosure of the riddle that

²³ Block argues that “jawbone hill apparently refers to the mound he (Samson) had built with the corpses of the Philistines” (*Judges, Ruth* 446). But if Ramath-Lehi does not denote an actual hill, then it seems more plausible that “jawbone hill” describes the mound of corpses he “stock-piled” *during* the slaughter. The brief song that Samson composed to celebrate his amazing victory (15:16) strongly suggests that the use of the jawbone in combat (not his hands “building” a mound) accounts for the “two heaps” (Heb. חֲמֵרִים). Be that as it may, in the mind of the author/editor “jawbone hill” would also have depicted a geographical site (whether a hill or not), since the place was obviously still known to him as Lehi (15:9, 14, 19).

²⁴ Against Soggin, the thirty “companions” (Heb. רֵעִים, 14:11) should not be construed as “friends” or as a wedding escort for the bridegroom (cf. *Judges* 241), but as bodyguards ordered to keep the potentially dangerous Danite in check. This interpretation agrees with the LXX_A, which reads ἐν τῷ φοβεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς αὐτὸν προσκατέστησαν αὐτῷ ἑταίρους τριάκοντα, “since they were afraid of him, they appointed thirty fellows for him” (14:11). The divergence from MT is likely due to the confusion of the Hebrew roots רָאָה and אָרָא, which often have phonetically similar inflections. These thirty men entertained a fundamentally hostile demeanor towards Samson, as is evident from their threat to the Timnite woman recorded in 14:15. Accordingly, they are more likely to have acted as guards protecting the Philistine community against possible damage. Their words to the bride indicate that this was their foremost concern: they were ready to kill her and her family in case she would side with her bridegroom, and such a change in attitude hardly befits folks whose only intention was to provide Samson with fellowship. No, they had come to the wedding for the purpose of making sure that Samson would not do anything that could harm their own interests.

prompted Samson's first deadly raid in Philistine territory (14:19), which in turn became paradigmatic for his subsequent victories. And, as mentioned above, David's final defeat and subjugation of the Philistines virtually coincided with the completion of the conquest. As the one through whom God would *begin* to deliver Israel, Samson's battles with the Philistines anticipate the completion of the conquest. The author/editor, most probably living at some point after the introduction of the monarchy in Israel (cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25),²⁵ may well have had this memorable moment in Israel's history in mind and saw it represented in the lion incident. He therefore did not only include (or retain) the episode because it paves the way for the introduction of Samson's riddle, but also because it *foreshadows* Israel's deliverance, a promise connected with the judgeship of Samson. Although the book of Judges is replete with evidence that Israel had utterly failed in carrying out Yahweh's command to conquer their enemies, in Samson he undertakes a new beginning and remains faithful to his promise made in 13:5 and pictured in the killing of the lion and the bees living in the carcass, irrespective of the judge's (or the nation's²⁶) flawed character.

²⁵ Determining the date of composition for the book of Judges is a difficult task, not the least because the question of the literary evolution of the deuteronomistic history is still pending. But the above references seem to argue my point. Whether the author/editor operated in preexilic or postexilic times is irrelevant for our purpose, although I would favor the former option. An insightful article on the subject has been written by Brevard S. Childs, "A Study of the Formula, 'Until This Day,'" *JBL* 82 (1963) 279–292.

²⁶ As discussed in part in n. 3, it is clear that Samson's controversial behavioral patterns are reflective of Israel's shortcomings.