

Literary conventions and repetition in Judges 13-16

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“Samson was more than just a hero, he was a superhero; and like all superheroes, his birth was divinely prophesied, and his strength was beyond that of mortal men, and he fought for justice, and had a hidden weakness whose exposure would lead to his downfall: Nazirite.”

— David Javerbaum, *The Last Testament*.

Filled with angelic prophesy, piety, sexuality, and violence; the story of Samson in Judges 13 through 16, from his birth to his dramatic death is a compelling tale of the Israelite strong man who led his people as a Judge during an era of persecution at the hands of the Philistines. The use of literary elements such as convention and repetition help to make the life and death of Samson into an incredibly entertaining story, one that the Israelite people would have looked to when in need of a morale boost, or perhaps even as a model for when faced with questions about how to act in the face of adversity, despite Samson’s characterization as somewhat violent, he is a Nazirite dedicated to God, a former leader of the Israelite people, and could therefore be seen a role model for Israelites who seek to stand up for themselves against their oppressors. The narrative of Samson, including his marriages and death, is a classic example of Israelite storytelling; it contains all the necessary literary tools needed in order to keep it relevant within the biblical narrative, is entertaining enough to keep the audience intrigued until the very end of the story, but also contains a strong message about power, God’s will, and the hope of Israel.

Throughout the narrative, the authors of the story use conventions that are common within Biblical narrative. Samson’s birth was foretold to his barren mother by an angel of the Lord.¹ This set-up for a pregnancy and birth signifies that the child will grow up to be a great man in the eyes of the Israelite people, just as two of the three patriarchs were born to barren mothers, so too was the leader Samson.² The hero who has super-human strength is a convention that has stood the test of time, from the Greek hero Hercules to modern day superheroes such as Superman, demonstrating that there is a great interest in men who are able to protect their people and defeat an army in battle. There is no better example of this great ability than Samson, the man who killed one thousand men from Judah with the Jawbone of a donkey.³

The use of repetition figures strongly throughout the narrative as well; three times the audience reads about the restrictions placed upon Samson’s mother because of his status as a Nazirite from birth.⁴ After he meets Delilah, she nags Samson to reveal the secret to his strength three times before he gives in to her questioning.⁵ This nagging for the answer as to what will cause Samson to lose his strength is reminiscent of Samson’s marriage to the woman from Timnah, where Samson tells the men of Timnah at his marriage feast a riddle and promises thirty cloths of linen and thirty festal clothes. When the townsmen cannot figure out the riddle, they convince Samson’s wife to get the answer from her husband. Samson’s wife nags him for four days before he gives in and explains the riddle to her, only for her to turn around and immediately repeat the answer to the townsmen, who by answering the riddle correctly, set off a series of calamitous events resulting in the death of thirty men of Ashkelon.⁶ As a Nazirite from

birth, Samson was granted supernatural strength for as long as remained mindful of the rules set forth to his mother before his birth; he lost his great strength after he fell victim to the deceit of his foreign love, and was subsequently captured and mutilated by the Philistines.⁷ The emphasis on the prohibitions that made Samson strong, as well the resistance of Samson to divulge to his lover what will cause him to lose his power, reveals just how central Samson's strength is to this narrative. Not only was he a skilled warrior, but his super human strength is indicative of the favor he found from God by being dedicated to Him from birth; much like Samuel who was a Nazirite from birth and became a great Prophet of Israel.⁸

There are two pairs of repeated words throughout Judges 13-16, which seem to point out the role of women in this particular narrative, as well clue in the audience about the fate of Samson. When Samson is in the presence of either his wife or Delilah, there is a sense that he doesn't do much talking; that the women in his life tend to be the one's asking all the questions, which leads to the repeated use of the word *nag*.⁹ Samson's companions are not depicted as demure or sweet women, but rather demanding, nagging, and conniving women. The use of the word *nag* and the characterization of Samson's wife and Delilah, allows the audience to understand that when it comes to Samson, women are dangerous, thus subtly setting up the end of the story. The use of the word *death* also comes up in the story in moments that strike the reader as somewhat conspicuous, before Samson is even born his mother recounts what the Angel said to her:

...but he said to me, 'You shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.'¹⁰

The second time the word death comes up is during the scene in which Delilah finally wears Samson down about the root of his power: "Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death."¹¹ In the first case, the use of the word death may foreshadow that Samson is fated to die at the end of the narrative because he loses his status as a Nazirite. The second use of the word is indicative of what will happen to Samson now that he has revealed the secret to his downfall. While both words are used only twice in the narrative their place in the story stands out enough to be considered indicative of a deeper meaning, why mention death when looking forward to a child's birth? How is it possible for Samson, a man who slayed one thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey, to be exhausted almost to the point of death because of a nagging woman?¹² Repetition is thus proved to be a useful literary tool in pinpointing the facets of the Hero that are most important to the narrative; his incredible strength, his weakness for dangerous foreign women, and his ultimate fate to die as a hero.

While there are only three short chapters involving Samson, there is a great sense of suspense throughout the story which continuously builds up with every one of Samson's victories; from the defeat of a lion and his fearlessness in the face of a swarm of bees¹³, the

defeat of thirty¹⁴ and then one thousand men¹⁵ and the eventual massacre of innumerable Philistines when he brought the pagan temple down unto the worshippers and himself.¹⁶ This suspense draws the audience into the story, making it greatly entertaining. The story also conveys the message that though God grants special powers to those who dedicate their lives to Him, it also serves as a cautionary tale, warning against relationships with foreigners, especially foreign women. Samson's mother, an Israelite is the one woman mentioned who is deemed worthy of contact with the Lord, which lends to a sense of support of endogamy, which in the Israelite context makes sense as they were in support of strong boundaries between themselves and non-Israelites. The tale of Samson is not only a magnificent story about a great man who sacrificed his life rather than fall victim to the foreigners, but it conveys the realities of the relationships between Israelites and their neighbors. The Israelites faced subjugation at the hands of their oppressors and yearned to be free of that subjugation, it is therefore great story filled with all the elements that the Israelites would find meaningful under their particular circumstance.

Endnotes

¹ Judges 13: 3. NSRV

² Genesis 18: 11-12, 25: 21. NSRV

³ Judges 15: 15-16. NSRV

⁴ Judges 13: 5, 7, 14. NSRV

⁵ Judges 16: 4-21. NSRV.

⁶ Judges 14: 12-19. NSRV

⁷ Judges 16: 20-21. NSRV

⁸ 1 Samuel. 1: 5-11. NSRV

⁹ Judges 14: 17, 16: 16. NSRV

¹⁰ Judges 13: 7. NSRV

¹¹ Judges. 16: 16. NSRV

¹² Judges 15: 15. NSRV

¹³ Judges 14: 5-10. NSRV

¹⁴ Judges 14: 19. NSRV

¹⁵ Judges 15: 15. NSRV

¹⁶ Judges 16: 13. NSRV

