

Themes in Biblical Narrative

Jewish and Christian Traditions

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Samson: Hero or Fool?

The Many Faces of Samson

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BRILL

RABBINIC DISCOURSE ABOUT SAMSON:
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE BETWEEN THE TANNAITIC CULTURE
TO THE AMORAIC*

Ronit Nikolsky

The rabbinic culture presents itself as a way of life depending and continuing its predecessors, accepting the authority of earlier sages, and adhering to canonized texts. On the other hand, the same literature, handed down through the ages, exhibit literary and cultural variety, which distinguish periods and geographical groups from each other. Such a variety is apparent in the dual heritage of priestly and Pharisaic cultures in the Tannaitic repertoires, the shift from the Tannaitic to the Amoraic literary forms, the difference between the Palestinian reworking of older material and the Babylonian one, and the influence of philosophy and linguistics on the medieval rabbinic cultures. While not always acknowledged, change and development do occur in rabbinic culture.

These changes are the result of changing living conditions and the introduction of external influence on the Rabbis, but they are also the attestation for shifts between dominant cultural sub-groups within the rabbinic society.¹ Although not widely inclusive, rabbinic corpora, once written, do not insist on presenting a unified point of view, thus enabling the observer to discern different cultural voices existing next to each other. The combination of pronounced traditionalism, non-exclusivity, and constant re-adaptation allows the scholar of the rabbinic culture to observe the interplay between cultural change and its continuity.

The case of Samson is not different from others; narratives about him reveal the existence of multiple cultural voices in the rabbinic literature. The variety is expressed in the choice of aspects from Samson's story

* I thank Reuven Kiperwasser for reading a draft of this article and making numerous helpful remarks. Since this article was written, Simon Fogel published some exquisite and elaborate studies about Samson. Incorporating his work into this article is beyond what I can do at the moment, I therefore advise the reader to consult Fogel's work as well.

¹ For a description of such processes see the Polysystem model developed by Even-Zohar (Even-Zohar 1990) which takes into consideration nuances in cultural narratives. The model uses the concept of cultural repertoire, a pool of cultural mental and intellectual products on which various sub-groups may draw. While all parts of a society share a basic narrative, each group draws parts of the repertoire suitable for its needs, and reworks it into fitting its own sub-narrative.

being discussed, the verses being expounded, the halakhic context in which Samson's actions are quoted, and in the other Biblical figures in whose company he is found.

In this article, I will present a variety of narratives where Samson appears, and will follow the changes occurring in the passage from the Tannaitic to the Amoraic period.

For the analysis of the texts, I used the narratological approach developed by James Kugel (Kugel 1994, 3–9; 2006, 4–7). The central concept of this approach is the 'exegetical motifs', described as 'the underlying idea about how to explain a Biblical verse, that becomes the basis, or part of the basis, of a narrative expansion' (Kugel 1994, 8). I use the term to point to narratives about Samson even in cases where no verse is mentioned. The usefulness of the concept 'motif' is that it is a name that points to a combination of phenomena, such as the reference to a person, a plot, a Biblical verse, and its expounding. One example is the motif 'followed his eyes' which is based on the words of Samson 'take her for me, because she pleases my eyes' (Judg 14:3). In this motif Samson exemplifies the hermeneutical principle of measure-for-measure in various Tannaitic corpora.

In all of the above I am not making any assumption about how the motifs were transmitted, whether orally or in writing, as a fixed text or as an idea.

SAMSON IN THE TANNAITIC LITERATURE

The modest role Samson plays in the Tannaitic corpora is apparent in the fragmentary nature of the information about him found in context of other topics. This might be due either to the low status of the non-Pentateuch book of Judges, or to his problematic personality as emerging from the Biblical story. I will discuss three motifs at some length and will briefly mention some others.

The Motif "Badan is Samson"

In chapter two of tractate Rosh Ha-Shana, the Tosefta discusses various Israelite rulers. In the middle of the passage, the Tosefta quotes an independent textual source about Samuel's speech to the Israelites found in the Bible. In his attempts to show the futility of having a king, Samuel enumerates to the Israelites the various saviors whom God had sent them. The Tosefta clarifies the identity of some of the less familiar names on this list:

God sent Yerubaal, Badan, Jephthah and Samuel [and they saved you from the hands of the enemies surrounding you, and set you in peace] (1 Sam 12:11)

Yerubaal is Gideon.

Badan is Samson.

Jephthah is as it is.

And it says: 'Moses, Aaron with his priests, and Samuel are among those who called to God, and He answers them' (Ps 99:6).

The text compares three insignificant people with three great people in order to teach you that the court of Yerubaal was as important for God as the court of Moses, and the court of Jephthah was as important for God as the court of Samuel.

[This is done] in order to inform you that whoever is nominated a leader of the people, even [if he is] a meaningless person, is [to be] considered the great among the great ones.

As it says: 'and you came to the priests and to the Levites [who will be in those days, and you will ask and they will tell you the verdict]' (Deut 17:9)

You only have the judge who is in your generation (t.RH 2.18 L.)²

From the four rulers Samuel mentions, two rulers are familiar, Samuel and Jephthah, while the other two, Badan and Yerubaal, are less familiar. The interpretation of Badan as Samson stems from the similarity between this name of Samson's tribe, Dan, and the name of the ruler; Yerubaal is explained as Gideon. The text then quotes a verse from Psalms, where Samuel, together with the great Israelite leaders Moses and Aaron are mentioned as the three leaders who are answered by God. Samuel's status thus established, the Tosefta returns to the original verse, where Samuel is mentioned among second rate rulers Gideon, Samson and Jephthah. According to the Tosefta the Bible teaches that one should be content with whatever ruler one has, even if on a personal or a religious level this ruler does not seem suitable for leadership.

While Samuel's respected status is established in this passage, Samson's lower status becomes apparent. Without specifying which quality or act of Samson is not appreciated, and without any reference to the Biblical text, Samson is classified among those who are hardly considered suitable for leadership, among Gideon and Jephthah, two second rate rulers in origin

² The passage ends with a quote from Ecclesiastics, which I omitted because of irrelevancy.

and in deeds. Presenting Samson in this manner, the Tosefta contradicts the Biblical narrative, where all four rulers are characterized saviors.

The Discourse about Samson's Nazariteship

The Hebrew word *nazir*, the origin the English term nazirite and naziriteship, may roughly be translated into English as 'an ascetic'. The term refers to a manner of religiosity expressed by such means as sexual abstinence or the restriction on food consumption. Although not warmly advocated, this manner of religious behavior is permitted by the Biblical law, and following it, by the Jewish rabbinic culture. The Biblical-Jewish nazirite does not cut his hair, does not consume wine or any other grape products, and does not come in contact with corpses.³ A person becomes a nazirite by declaring himself to be one. He may do so for a limited period, or he could take upon himself a lifelong nazirite vow (see Amit for an extensive study of Samson and naziriteship). The Mishna devotes a whole tractate to the rules of nazirite conduct. Samson is called a nazirite in the Bible, therefore a person may declare himself a nazirite by referring to the story or the customs of Samson (Naz 1.2):

[If a person says:] 'I am a nazirite like Samson' or 'like the son of Manoah' or 'like the husband of Delilah' or 'like the one who uprooted the gates of Gaza' or 'like the one whose eye were gouged out by the Philistines', he is a Samsonite nazirite.

What is the difference between an eternal nazirite and a Samsonite nazirite?

An eternal nazirite—if his hair becomes too heavy, he lightens its weight with by cutting it and sacrifices three animals; and if he is defiled, he offers a purification sacrifice.

A Samsonite nazirite—if his hair becomes too heavy he may not lighten its weight; if he is defiled—he may not offer a purification sacrifice.

The Mishna discusses the rules of a self-declared Samsonite nazirite, and compares it with those of an eternal nazirite. An eternal nazirite is granted some privileges which a limited-period nazirite does not have: he may cut his hair if it becomes too heavy, and 'pay' for this privilege by offering three sacrificial animals; he may also purify himself if he is defiled, again by offering a sacrifice. In contrast, a Samsonite nazirite, also a lifelong one, may not cut his hair and may not purify himself if defiled. The two particulars of the Samsonite nazirite seem both to derive from

the Biblical story of Samson, where Samson is never described as cutting his hair or offering any sacrifice.⁴ Although dependent on the Biblical narrative, the Mishna does not cite any Biblical verses to show this dependency.

While not too much may be conjectured from these short rules, they can be typified to some extent when looked at from an anthropological point of view. Both the prohibition on the cutting of hair and the restriction on purifying oneself from defilement demarcate the Samsonite nazirite as an outsider: not being able to participate in the Temple rite, nor having the possibility to care for his outer appearance, the Samsonite nazirite is an impure wild looking creature. Not a very attractive person to have around.

Nonetheless, the Samsonite naziriteship is presented as a legitimate conduct in the Mishna. This is not the case in other Tannaitic sources. Based on the Biblical story, the Tosefta quotes rabbi Shimon's opinion prohibiting any person from declaring himself a Samsonite nazirite: 'If one says "I am like Samson", it is like he said nothing, because Samson's naziriteship was not pronounced by his own mouth' (t.Naz 1.5) Rabbi Shimon relies on the Biblical story, where the angel pronounced Samson as a nazirite (Judg 13:5), when concluding that Samsonite naziriteship may only be divinely assigned. Another Tannaitic corpus, the midrash Sifre Zuta, clarifies its opinion about Samsonite naziriteship when expounding the Biblical verse 'this is the rule of the *nazir*' (Num 6:13): 'does the rule [of the nazirite] apply also to Samsonite nazirite? [no, since it is written] this [and no other]' (SifZut 244). Samsonite naziriteship is, according to Sifre Zuta, not included in the law of the nazirite.

To sum up this motif, Samsonite naziriteship is discussed in the context of the rules of nazirite, but Biblical verses from the story of Samson are not quoted; it is apparent that the Tannaitic culture does not favor Samson's religious conduct. Although the halakhic compositions do not go as far as de-legitimate Samsonite naziriteship, Sifre Zuta seems to be almost doing exactly this.

Samson Followed His Eyes

The hermeneutic principle 'measure-for-measure' is formulated in the Tannaitic culture as 'in a measure that a person metes, in it he is being

³ The Biblical rules of the *nazir* are found in Num 6:1-21.

⁴ Neither the Bible nor the Mishna say that Samson was defiled by bodies; this seems to be a theoretical possibility.

meted' (וְיָרַח עֵינָיו לַפְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיִּבְרַח מֵעֵינָיו). This hermeneutic tool is used by the rabbis to point to the parallels between a crime committed by a Biblical figure and the divine retribution (Rosen-Zvi 2006). Various Biblical stories are explained in light of this principle, and Samson's sin and his punishment are among them. Here is how the Mishna formulates this idea:

Samson followed his eyes, therefore the Philistines gouged out his eyes; as it is said (Judg 16:21): 'and the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes' (Sot 1:8).

The reference to Samson is introduced in a passage about the punishment of the Deviant Woman. After describing the punishment, the Mishna lists two other Biblical stories to which this principle applies: those of Samson and Absalom. The Mishna then lists cases where this principle was applied in a positive manner, i.e. the good behavior of the protagonist was rewarded, the stories of Miriam and Joseph.⁵

The Mishna quotes a verse describing Samson's punishment, but it does not quote a verse describing Samson's sin. The Tosefta, on the other hand, quotes such a verse in its rendering of motif:

Samson rebelled using his eyes, as it is said: 'and Samson said to his father, take her for me' (Judg 14:3). He, therefore, was punished in his eyes, as it is said: 'and the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes' (Judg 16:21).

Rabbi says: the beginning of his sins was in Gaza, therefore, his punishment was also in Gaza (t.Sot 3:15 L.).

There are significant differences between the Mishna and the Tosefta in the presentation of this motif. One difference is the words 'rebelled using his eyes' in the Tosefta, instead of 'followed his eyes' in the Mishna; who was Samson rebelling against? Another difference, already mentioned above, is that unlike the Mishna, the Tosefta quotes a proof verse to illustrate Samson's sin (Judg 14:3): 'and Samson said to his father: take her for me, because she pleases my eyes'.⁶ This verse is part of a dialog between Samson and his father, where Samson insists on marrying the Philistine woman that he saw, and does not accept his father's suggestion to take a woman of his own people. Rabbi's statement that Samson's sin began in

Gaza is yet another difference between the Tosefta and the Mishna. The last divergence from the Mishna version is the list of sinners among which Samson is included (not quoted here). I will consider these differences from last to first.

In both the Mishna and the Tosefta, the context is the principle of measure-for-measure as applied in the case of the Deviant Woman. In both compositions, we find a list of Biblical figures to which this principle is applied. However, whereas in the Mishna the figures are Samson, Absalom, Miriam and Joseph, in the Tosefta they are the people of the flood, the people of the Tower of Babel, the people of Sodom, the Egyptians, Sisera, Samson, Absalom, Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar. Where in the first included among two lapsed Israelites and two respected heroes, Samson is now found among major sinners and enemies of the Israelites. Not only kings of great and evil empires are numbered in this list, but also whole generations of sinning people. Being in the company of such is definitely not flattering. The Tosefta depicts Samson less favorably than the Mishna.

The Tosefta quotes a verse illustrating that Samson's sin was marrying the Philistine woman (Judg 14:3). Rabbi is quoted as being of the opinion that Samson's sin began in Gaza. Since the Philistine woman did not live in Gaza, but in Timna, marrying her was not the sin Rabbi had in mind. Reading further into Samson's story in the Bible, we come across another woman whom Samson saw and coveted, the harlot from Gaza: 'Samson went to Gaza, saw there a harlot, and copulated with her' (Judg 16:1). Apparently this was the woman to whom Rabbi referred, at least according to the Tosefta.

Rabbi is traditionally considered the compiler of the Mishna, and indeed, it appears that there is some agreement between the Mishna's representation of Samson's sin and Rabbi's opinion as quoted in the Tosefta; not because in both cases the harlot from Gaza is the source of the sin, but because the Mishna refrains from saying that marrying the Philistine woman was the sin. It is hard to say whether the Mishna is alluding to the harlot from Gaza as Samson's sin or not. The later sources do claim that this is the intention of the Mishna. As for the Mishna itself, there are these considerations: On the one hand, the verse about the Philistine woman is a central verse in Samson's Biblical narrative, and the expression found there 'she pleases my eyes' draws the reader's attention to Samson's eyes much more than the mere 'he saw' which is said about the harlot. On the other hand, Samson marrying the woman from Timna is part of God's plan, as is clearly stated in the verse '... his father and his mother knew

⁵ Zohar 2007, 73–96 studies the development of the various examples of this principle, and how the editors' work creates the special message of the *Mekhilta*.

⁶ Only the beginning of the verse is quoted in the text, but as often happens in rabbinic text, the words not quote are the important ones for the discussion.

not that it was from the Lord... Presenting this marriage as a sin might raise theological difficulties.

I think it is safe to conjecture that the motif in the cultural repertoire of the Mishna was based on the verse 'she pleases my eyes', referring to the Philistine woman and presenting the marriage with her as a sin. The Mishna, then, quoted this motif, but avoided saying openly that this marriage was a sin, thus, keeping intact the Biblical story, the motif, and the integrity of God's plan. Because the Mishna avoided referring to Samson's marriage as the sin, the Tosefta understood the Mishna's view as saying that Samson's sin began with the harlot from Gaza.

For itself the Tosefta uses a different method to avoid the theological problem. It formulates Samson's sin not as 'seeing', but as 'rebell[ing] with his eyes', rebelling against his father, who advised him to marry a woman of his own people.

Four other Tannaitic corpora use this motif, Mekhilta 123; Mekhilta de Rabbi 151; SiNNum 126, and SiZut 236. The Mekhiltas formulates the parallelism between sin and punishment as 'upon what they pride themselves they will be punished', and points to a list Biblical stories where this principle is applied. The list is the same as the one in the Tosefta. Thus the Mekhiltas are similar to the Tosefta both in content (the list of sinners), and in the way they overcome the theological difficulty (not presenting the sin as 'seeing' but as 'priding oneself'). Sifre Zuta is very close to the Mishnaic formulation of the motif. Sifre on Numbers is innovative in using the motif 'followed his eye' to interpret a verse from numbers '... remember all the commandments of the Lord, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes which you are inclined to go after wantonly' (Num 15:39).

Other Representations of Samson in Tannaitic Literature

Samson is mentioned in a few other instances in Tannaitic corpora. I will mention them here to complete the overview.

The 'servant of God' motif: Samson is numbered among people who called themselves 'servant of God', but God did not designate them as such (*SifDeut* 42; *Midr Tann* 16). Together with Samson, the list includes King Solomon and the prophet Samuel.

The 'savior from Dar' motif: Samson is mentioned in a list saviors whom Moses saw in a vision standing on Mount Nebo (*Mek* 184; *Mek de Rabbi* 1714; *SifDeut* 425; *Midr Tann* 223).

Samson is mentioned in one more instance, but not in the framework of a motif: he appears in the rabbinic chronography Seder Olam (*Seder Olam*, 292).

Summary and Conclusions

The halakhic discourse exhibits various voices assessing Samson's nazarethship, starting with an almost straightforward rejection of it (*SiZut*), through presenting it in a negative tone (*Tosefta*), and ending with including it as the less appealing variant of this religious conduct (*Mishna*).

In the narrative-aggadic discourse, there is only one prominent motif about Samson is prominent, 'followed his eyes'. This motif seems to be based on the verse about the woman from Timna pleasing Samson's eyes. The sources find various manners to overcome the risk of presenting God's plan as a sin, such as changing 'following the eyes' into 'rebell[ing] with the eyes' or 'wrongly priding oneself', or avoiding using the verse in the passage.

In most Tannaitic sources Samson is criticized; the criticism is made apparent by allusions to his immoral conduct, to the 'otherness' of his nazarethship, or by including him in a company of ill-reputed people. This attitude seems to cross genre boundaries. There is only one case where Samson is represented positively; this is the 'savior from Dar' motif. The wholly positive attitude toward Samson as a Danite is surprising, but the text where this is found is unusual in its positive attitude toward non-Judaic or non-priestly tribes (See Nikolsky 2007).

SAMSON IN THE AMORAIC LITERATURE

It is complicated to determine to what extent the Amoraic culture is a continuation of the Tannaitic one. The gap between the two is signified by the Amoraic producing a commentary on the Mishna; this demonstrates both the authoritative status of the Mishna in the eyes of the Amoraic as well as their feeling of distinctiveness from the Tannaitic culture.

Some of the motifs about Samson from the Tannaitic period disappear in the Amoraic one (at times, only to re-appear in the later, saboraic, period). The chronological statement from *Seder Olam* is not found neither in the Amoraic strata nor in later ones, while the motifs 'Samson the Savior' and 'slave of God' are absent in the Amoraic strata but re-appear in the saboraic.

The innovation of the Amoraic strata is mainly in the aggadic genres, where verses from Biblical narratives are discussed and their story expanded and expounded. Five verses from the story of Samson are discussed in the Tannaitic material, while more than 25 in the Amoraic. In the Tannaitic period, Samson is prominent in only one midrashic discussion,

the 'followed his eyes' motif. In the Amoraic strata there are at least ten motifs about Samson, making Samson represented in all classical Amoraic corpora: the Palestinian Talmud (PT), Genesis Rabba (GenR), Leviticus Rabba (LevR) and Psikta de-Rav Kahana (PRK).

Tannaitic Motifs Followed Up in the Amoraic Period

Being a commentary on the Mishna (albeit not necessarily our version of the Mishna), the PT is expected to address issues that are discussed in the Mishna. Indeed the PT we find a discussion of Samsonite naziriteship in the tractate *nazir* (PT, 1097–8). The PT discusses the possible friction between the naziriteship described in the Pentateuch and the Samsonite naziriteship (as did Sifre Zuta), preferring the one advocated in the Pentateuch; it talks about Samson being defiled by corpses (as does the Tosefta); and confirms that Samsonite naziriteship is a divinely commanded and cannot be self-pronounced (again found in the Tosefta). It is evident that the PT does not follow the Mishna exclusively, but is rather inclusive in discussion Tannaitic sources.

Found in six corpora, 'followed his eyes' was the most prominent motif in the midrashic-narrative genres of the Tannaitic period. I pointed to the discrepancy between this motif and Biblical reading of Samson's sin, and the manner in which the sources overcome this difficulty. The Tosefta interprets the Mishna as saying that Samson's sin was not marrying the woman from Timna, but chasing the harlot from Gaza. The PT readily embraces this understanding of the Mishna:

They say: Rabbi says that he [= Samson] began sinning in Gaza, therefore his punishment was in Gaza.

But it is written 'Samson went to Timna!'

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said: 'this he did for marriage' (p.Sot 1.4, 17a).

Following the Tosefta, the PT clearly supports the opinion that Samson's sin was following the harlot from Gaza, not marrying the woman from Timna. Except for the PT, the 'followed his eyes' motif is found in the classical Amoraic corpus Genesis Rabba (GenR 768):

Jacob adhered to his father and to his mother' (Gen 28:7).

It is written so: 'A man's way is right in his own eyes [and the one who adheres to an advice is wise]!'

'A man's way is straight in his own eyes'—this is Samson. [As it says:] 'Samson said to his father: take her for me, because she pleases my eyes' (Judg 14:3).

'And the one who listens to an advice is wise' (Prov 12:15)—this is Jacob, [since] Jacob listened to his father and to his mother' (Gen 28:7).

The motif wanders away from the measure-for-measure hermeneutic principle, and finds its way into a proem, the classical rabbinic poetic device.⁷ The original verse, Jacob adhered to his father' (Gen 28:7), describe Jacob following his parents' advice and going to Padan Aram to find a wife. The new verse which is introduced in order to construct the proem is: 'the way of a fool is right in his own eyes, and the one who adheres to an advice is wise' (Prov 12:15). Jacob is the example of the wise who adheres to an advice (and thus he is the link between the verse of the proem and the original verse) and Samson is the fool who follows his own eyes. Both Jacob and Samson were occupied with finding a wife. Jacob follows his parents' advice about choosing a wife while Samson acted contrary to his father's advice to take a woman from his own people.

GenR uses the motif 'followed his eyes' in a new context, other than the Tannaitic (including SifNum, which also has an original context) or the PT. It follows the Tosefta in presenting Samson's rebellion as his sin, and not his following his eyes, as in the Mishna.

The motif 'Samson is Badar', like the two others which were discussed in the previous chapter, is found in the PT (p.RH 2.8, 58b). The major lines of the motif are the same in the Tosefta and in the PT: both quote 1 Samuel 12; both identify Yerubaal as Gideon and Badar as Samson; both assert that the lesser rulers should be respected as much as the great ones; and both see a problem in grouping Sammel, who is a prophet, together with the lesser judges, Samson, Jephthah and Gideon. The only addition in the PT is an explanation that the narrative was structured so as to present the positive rulers in the beginning (Moses and Aaron) and he end (Samuel), and the lesser ones in the middle. The PT's rendering of this motif is very close to the Tosefta, but is slightly shorter.

Three Tannaitic motifs found their way to the Amoraic compilations; all three are found in the PT, and all three rely on the version found also in the Tosefta. No other Tannaitic motif about Samson is found in the Amoraic period. As far as motifs about Samson are concerned, the Tosefta is more representative of the cultural repertoire on which the Amoraic culture drew than other Tannaitic corpora.

⁷ A proem, *ptichita* in Aramaic, is a hermeneutic structure where while expounding one verse, another one is introduced, expounded, and eventually is connected lexically or by topic to the original verse.

