



‘To see or not to see, that is the question’: Judges 13–16

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Abstract

In contrast to the other judges who began with an impediment, Samson starts with everything in his favour. The expectation is created that we are dealing with some sort of a superhero. The listener’s hopeful expectations of Samson remain completely unfulfilled, while Samson follows his own agenda. The first action in his public life is to ‘see’ a Philistine girl (of all people) and to fall in love with her! The direct translation from the Hebrew, ‘she is right in my eyes’, refers clearly to the theme of ‘see’ and also forward to the refrain at the end of the book (Judges 17-21): ‘Everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (Judges 21:25). ‘To see’ has both a physical and a perceptual connotation: ‘to see’ is thus ‘to know’ and ‘not to see’ is to be ‘uninformed’. A socio-rhetorical approach makes it possible to identify rhetorical techniques that the writer uses to highlight social relations, regulations and ideologies in the text.

Keywords/terms: Judges, Samson, to see or not to see, socio-rhetorical approach, to know or not to know.

Introduction

There are many themes in the story of Samson and his family, but one which occurs right through the Book of Judges is ‘to see or not to see’ i.e. ‘to know or not to know’. To be sure this theme appears in many other books of the Old (e.g. 2 Chronicles 16:9) and New Testaments (Jesus’ words). ‘To see’ has both a physical and a perceptual connotation: ‘to see’ is ‘to know’ and ‘not to see’ is to be ‘uninformed’. This theme of ‘see’ plays rather an important role in the episodes that follow (Harris, Brown & Moore, 2000:244). In Judges 13, Manoah could also not ‘see’ that it was the LORD who was speaking to him, while his wife realised straight away. On a number of occasions Samson was unable to ‘see’ that the women were leading him on. Eventually he is unable to see physically when he is taken prisoner. In the Book of Judges, it is stated numerous times that the people did what was wrong ‘in the eyes of the Lord’ and in the last chapter we learn again that ‘everybody did what was right in their own eyes’ (Judges 21:25).

The last and possibly best known of the stories of the judges is that of Samson. Most people’s knowledge is, however, limited to Samson’s relationship with Delilah (Judges 16:4–31) and they probably have DeMille’s film *Samson and Delilah* to thank for their information (McCann, 2002:92). All indications in the story are that Samson will be someone exceptional: (1) the Angel’s appearance and announcement to the barren woman, (2) the Nazirite vow and (3) the blessing of Yahweh that was accompanied by the Spirit of the LORD (verses 24–25).



Although Samson may be regarded as a type of hero, his story in the Book of Judges is portrayed in a way that suggests that Samson was also the weakest and most ineffective of all the judges. *Unobservant* readers may *overlook* the fact that Samson does not live up to expectations, but that his mother is actually the real heroine of the story (McCann, 2002:97) - in terms of her faith and devotion to YHWH.

A socio-rhetorical approach makes it possible to identify rhetorical techniques that the writer of the Samson saga uses to highlight social relations, regulations and ideologies in the text (cf Van der Merwe, 2009:678; cf LaCocque, 1990:23, 28).¹ This approach is an authoritative aid to reveal certain parts in the text and it offers new possibilities for interpretation.

THE SAMSON SAGA

Although Samson obtained impressive 'victories' over the Philistines and killed many of them, he hardly started² 'the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines' (Judges 13:5), yet it would seem from the stories that he merely fought personal vendettas against the Philistines.

The Samson story consists of three parts: The first deals with the announcement of his birth (Judges 13) and the other two about his experiences with so-called 'heathen' women (Judges 14–16). Except for his mother (in Chapter 13 of Judges), the Samson story revolves around *three 'Philistine' women* – the woman of Timnah (Judges 14:1–15:20); the prostitute in the Philistine city of Gaza (Judges 16:1–3) and Delilah (Judges 16:4–31)³.

Because the Samson saga (cf Hamlin 1990:126) has a complex redactional history (or a narrator who created a composition from the available material), it is very difficult to single out a theme. Both chapters 14 and 16 begin in the same way with Samson going somewhere and then noticing or *seeing* a woman (Brettler, 2002:59).

Another theme that comes to the fore in the story (that I will briefly refer to) is the fact that Samson cannot keep his Nazirite vow (cf Blenkinsopp, 1963:65-76; Crenshaw, 1978). Chapters 13 and 16 refer explicitly to this, while chapters 14–15 refer more implicitly to the way in which Samson breaks his vow.

Although he does not agree with the domination of the Philistines, his weakness for women is so overwhelming that it blinds him to his divine mission (Hamlin, 1990:127).

Judges 13:2–25 is a standalone unit that tells of Samson's birth. It is accompanied by an announcement that focuses on Samson's miraculous birth and his status⁴ as a Nazirite

¹ The research of Van der Merwe (2009) is used extensively in this regard.

² It was only King Saul who succeeded in delivering the Israelites from the power of the Philistines.

³ It has not, however, been proven conclusively that all three women were Philistines: the text says merely that Samson's wife from Timnah was a Philistine; the others could even have been Israelites. Delilah even had a Hebrew name and lived in the border area between Israelite and Philistine territory. It is often assumed that she was a Philistine merely because she delivered Samson into the hands of the Philistines.

⁴ The Hebrew word *nazir* means 'to single out' or to be 'sanctified' (NRSV, RV). In Numbers 6:1–5 we find extensive requirements for such a person: As a sign of his special characteristic status his hair may not be shaved, he may not drink strong liquor and he may not touch anything unclean. In contrast to the priestly leadership, Samson's form of 'sanctity' is not inherited. To be sanctified on a certain level meant to 'be separated' from social and cultural life. This is what the



(Alter, 1990:115-130; Amit, 1999:292-293). Samson's mother sees the supernatural, breath-taking figure, but her husband still does not. One of the most important elements of the story of Manoah and his wife is exactly the fact that she had a spirit of discernment that enabled her to both judge and notice spiritual things. Unfortunately, her son will lack this gift of discernment.

Samson and his parents lived in Philistine territory or very close to the Philistines⁵. Everything in chapter 13 indicates that Samson was destined to be the best of all the judges (cf Exum, 1980:49). In contrast to what one would expect the heading of Chapter 14 could easily be: "Mummy, I want a wife!"

Samson's self-will and self-centredness are characteristic of the stories in chapters 14–16 which begin with his insistence on marrying a Philistine girl (14:1–3) – this was in opposition to the LORD and the objections of his parents (Martin, 2011:36).

14:1 Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman.

In the Biblical literature, a person's first actions or words are significant. They usually reveal the person's character which is indeed the case with Samson.

Samson's first action in Judges 14:1 is surprising; if truth be told, extremely disappointing (Harris et al., 2000:243). He sees a Philistine woman in Timnah (nameless like his mother) and insists in having her.

In verses 1 and 2, the Hebrew text repeats the sequence: 'I have seen a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines'. The *order of the words emphasises the word 'woman'* in Hebrew and the fact that she was a Philistine (a woman would be Samson's Achilles' heel) (Harris et al., 2000:243).

His parents object to this Philistine woman (Judges 14:3), and with good reason (cf Genesis 24:3,4; 26:34, 35; Exodus 34:15–17; Deuteronomy 7:1–4; Judges 2:2). Firstly, Samson's actions and marriage to a foreigner (cf Judges 3:5, 6) (Matthews, 2004:144) is against God's

Israelites needed so badly at this stage, one who was singled out for Yahweh's service and who would be able to lead the others in the right direction.

Long hair was characteristic of the epic soldiers in the Hebrew Bible (cf Absalom) (cf Judges 5 above).

It is indeed noteworthy that God could achieve anything through a character such as Samson. This is a theme that appears often, see for example, Rahab, the prostitute on the walls of Jericho who really brought about Israel's rescue and became part of the genealogical register in Matthew 1:5.

God's faithfulness in saving his 'people' is clear but Samson's unfaithfulness is alarming. Samson succeeds in breaking just about every parts of his Nazirite vow to God: he drinks alcohol (Judges 14:5, 10; cf Numbers 6:3); he touches the carcass of a dead animal (14:8; cf Numbers 6:6–8); and lastly he allows his hair to be cut (Judges 16:15–22; cf Numbers 6:5–6). Furthermore, he is regularly in contact with the inhabitants of the country, which was forbidden from the beginning (2:1–5; 3:6). The only time that God's spirit apparently left him was when his hair was cut off.

⁵ They were from the tribe of Dan and Samson's actions occurred in the traditional area allocated to Dan. Up to this point, the tribe of Dan had not taken possession of their tribal land (cf Joshua 19:47, 48). They could have used Samson to take possession of their tribal area for them; however, they never do this, but later they would very aggressively drive other groups (the people of Laish) off their land (cf ch 18).



will for his people. Secondly, the Philistines were the Israelites' greatest enemy (Matthews, 2004:144). It would bring shame on the family if Samson, a Nazirite, whose mission it was to save the Israelites from the Philistines, were to marry a 'heathen' Philistine woman (cf Judges 13:3–5).

The only direct answer that the parents get from Samson is, for a second time: '*Get her for me*' - the direct translation from the Hebrew, '*she is right in my eyes*', refers clearly to the theme of 'see' and also forward to the refrain at the end of the book (Judges 17–21): '*Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*' (Harris et al., 2000:244; McCann, 2002:101). This was his only motivation.

In Judges 14:5-7 Samson and his parents were on their way to Timnah to conclude the marriage. On the way, a lion pounced on Samson who was able to tear the lion apart with his bare hands. The Spirit of the LORD took hold of him. The story of the lion not only illustrates Samson's physical strength, his playfulness and his indifference to his calling as a Nazirite (Marais, 2001:45), but also expressly that the Spirit of the LORD gave him the strength⁶.

Why he ... 'told neither his father nor his mother what he had done' is not certain. They 'did not know', while Samson 'did know' (Harris et al 2000:245). His parents' ignorance about the incident is critical to understanding the events that follow (Judges 14:8–9). As a Nazirite, he was not supposed to be in the vineyard (Judges 13:4; Numbers 6:1–4), because it was against his Nazirite vows. Time and again, the people of the covenant, like Samson, did not succeed in fulfilling their covenant or agreement with God (Matthews, 2004:146). Thus, they did not do 'what was right in the eyes of the Lord'.

Later, Samson is on his way to marry the woman of Timnah and 'turns aside to *look* at the lion' that he had torn apart earlier (Judges 14:8, 9). The same verb 'to see', *ra'ah*, is used here as in verse 1. He often looks and sees what he is not supposed to look at or see.

He finds a swarm of bees with honey in the carcass. He eats some of the honey and also gives his parents some of it⁷. He *ate as he went along* and then he rejoined his parents and *he gave them some, and they too ate it*. They do not 'know' where he got it from and thus remain 'ignorant' about his violation of his vow (Harris et al., 2000:245). This incident with the honey sets the scene for the next episode.

As part of the wedding festivities it was customary for the bridegroom to hold a feast (Judges 14:10, 11). When the Philistine men 'see' him they make use of the occasion and *he was given thirty companions* (Judges 14:11)⁸.

⁶ It becomes clear in the judges' stories that the Spirit of the Lord's presence in a person's life does not necessarily dominate his/her will. It also becomes clear that the Lord can use someone in spite of his/her wrong decisions or weak points. The text does not say that God approved Samson's deeds – just that He used them to carry out His plan.

⁷ This is not the first time that Samson does not tell his parents everything (Judges 14:9). This behaviour ties in with chapter 16 where Samson does not tell Delilah everything – until he could no longer stand her constant nagging. His uncontrolled behaviour continues as he further ignores the prescripts of his Nazirite vows. He was not supposed to touch any dead creature. The condition was that if he touched anything dead he had to make a sacrifice of atonement and shave off his hair (Numbers 6:6). But he does nothing of the sort which is perhaps why he does not tell them where he got the honey from.

⁸ It must have cost a substantial amount to be able to give thirty companions food and shelter.



In Judges 14:12-18 Samson makes up a riddle⁹ that the young men have to try and solve. He knows the answer, but they do not. If they manage to solve the riddle they will each receive a new set of clothes from Samson. If not, they must give him 30 sets of clothes.

However, when they realise that they will not come up (will not know) with the answer in time they therefore threaten Samson's bride with death if she does not find out the answer for them from Samson.

His wife accuses him of *not telling her* the answer to the riddle. His defence is that he hasn't even explained it to his father or mother. As if he tells his parents everything.

When Samson learns that his father-in-law has given his bride to one of his groomsmen, he takes revenge on them (Judges 15:1–8). In Judges 15:10-11 the story takes a surprising turn when Samson is taken prisoner by *three thousand men from Judah* and is handed over to the Philistines (Judges 15:11–13; McCann, 2002:105).

In Judges 15:15 Samson once again violates his Nazirite vows by touching a dead thing – a *fresh jawbone of a donkey* (Harris et al., 2000:251) – to use it to kill the Philistines.

After Samson has killed the thousand Philistines, he suddenly develops a great thirst. Samson calls almost reproachfully on the LORD because there is nothing for him to drink. The LORD hears his call and miraculously provides him with water to drink (Judges 15:18-20). This is not only the first time that he calls to God, but also that he gives the honour of the victory to the LORD.

Samson and Delilah (Judges 16:1-31)

Samson could not stay away from Philistine territory (Judges 16). He was once again his old self, giving in to his two most vulnerable points, namely, his 'eye problem' (sexual desires) and his 'strange' women problem (this time a prostitute, NRSV) (Harris et al., 2000:254). *He saw a prostitute* (again a nameless woman) and he wanted her because *'she is right in my eyes'* (Judges 16:1).

Samson is driven by his physical desire for the woman in Gaza (just like the woman in Timnah, Judges 14:1). A man who was legendary for his supernatural strength could not keep his own passions and desires in check. The narrator of this story makes no attempt to cover up Samson's faults or weaknesses¹⁰.

Towards the end of the Samson cycle the tension builds in order to emphasise the incredible irony and tragedy in the story. As the story progresses the reader 'sees' that Samson did not 'see' and the reader 'knows' that Samson 'did not know'. The reader or audience 'see' with new eyes that we also do not always 'notice' our own faults (Harris et al., 2000:255). All the themes are closely linked with word-play and images in the Hebrew text.

⁹ The riddle that Samson gives them is in the form of a statement (Judges 14:14):
Out of the eater, something to eat;
Out of the strong, something sweet.

Eight of the seventeen times that the word חידה (riddle) appears in the Bible are in this chapter (Judges 14). The thematic meaning of riddles links the chapters even further. The answer that he eventually receives is in the form of a question.

¹⁰ The same happens with many other Old Testament characters, such as Abraham, Moses and David. The fact that their weaknesses have not been edited out, contribute to the credibility of the text and emphasise the message of God's incalculable and inexplicable mercy and patience with weak, sinful people.



Samson slept lightly in Philistine territory (Judges 16:3). It is as if he had a premonition about what was going to happen and got up earlier than the men of Gaza (who wanted to kill him) expected. The men of Gaza thought that they would outwit Samson, but they are the ones who are outwitted. They thought that he 'did not know' but he 'did know' about their plans.

The story of Samson and Delilah is a compelling and artistically complex story (Judges 16:1-31). It forms part of many cultures and has been retold in various media. The story of Samson and Delilah that follows (Judges 16:4–22) has almost the same elements as the story in Judges 14 and 15. In the previous story Samson posed a riddle which the Philistines tried to solve. In the next story there is again a game of cat and mouse, this time between Samson and Delilah, in order to find out the answer to the riddle of Samson's strength. The end is equally tragic.

The remarkable thing about Delilah (meaning 'delicate') is that she is the first woman in Samson's story that has a name and it is also the first time in his story that it is said that he fell in love. Her name could have been intended to suggest that she was a devotee of a foreign goddess and thus a sacred prostitute in Philistine society. This also symbolised the dangers of Samson having a liaison with her. Her name could equally be a play on the word *laylah* (night) (Schofield, 1976). Delilah is the third woman in Samson's story and, according to the Hebrew narrative tradition, one would expect her to be the most important (Harris et al., 2000:256). The Philistine leaders tell Delilah to seduce Samson (*patti*) so that she can 'know', literally 'see' (*ra'ah*), where his strength lies (Cundall, 1968:175).

The narrator of Judges 16:6–20 uses the well-known Biblical 'three-four pattern' to describe the way Delilah tries to discover the source of Samson's strength (Zakovitch, 1978). She fails in the first three attempts but is successful in the fourth (cf Proverbs 30 'three ... four'). Despite the meaning of his name, 'sun child', Samson is not very bright. Delilah comes straight to the point. Samson cannot really complain that he was led blindly into a trap. He should have *seen* it coming. The same pattern repeats itself again and again: each time he says that he will become 'like any other man' (take away his special relationship with YHWH as a Nazirite).

Delilah accuses Samson of making a fool of her and lying to her, in the meantime she is busy trying to hand him over to the Philistines (Judges 16:10). Both continue as if nothing had happened. One can indeed say of Delilah: perseverance pays off!

Finally, Samson falls prey to the same sort of emotional manipulation (as with the woman from Timnah, Judges 15:15-20) – this time from Delilah (Judges 16:15-16) – and does not learn the lesson that he cannot trust her.

He was driven by Delilah to *tell her everything* (Judges 16:17). He *told* Delilah what she 'did not know'. One of Samson's weak points – women – leads to his undoing. Without considering the consequences he tells his life's secret to Delilah¹¹.

In Judges 16:18 it is literally stated that Delilah 'saw' that this time he had told the truth¹². To *shave off the seven braids of his hair* means separation between him and God. The cutting of his hair has drastic consequences as it means that he no longer has a special relationship

¹¹ There was no magical power in his hair, but if it were cut off it would break the Nazirite vow and the Spirit that had always given him his strength would leave him.

¹² From this verse one realises that this time the Philistines had not waited in the room. They had probably decided that they did not want to be made a fool of again; she had to let them know when she had really found out his secret. This time she has the confidence to call them.



with God because he cannot fulfil the requirements of being a Nazirite (see Judges 14 above). The Spirit of the LORD which had earlier made him strong subsequently left him. He has now become just like everyone else!

It was not Samson's death that the Philistines desired but rather his humiliation (Judges 16:21). The theme of 'seeing' or 'not seeing' is continued here. It is a tragic irony that the Philistines *gouged out his eyes*, which became his greatest source of weakness and led to his downfall (Harris et al., 2000:258; cf Matthew 5:28–29).¹³

Samson returns to Gaza, this time not as the victor but as a total failure. The final scene plays out when a large crowd of Philistines 'see' Samson as a helpless prisoner (Judges 16:24). The Philistines 'see' the one with the 'eye problem', their enemy, standing before them (Harris et al., 2000:259). However, Samson can no longer see! Such a powerless blind man was usually spat on and hit to the great entertainment of the happy crowd.

The man that the armed Philistine soldiers were reluctant to take on is now guarded by a single helper (Judges 16:26; Cundall, 1968:180). He is projected as a pathetic invalid who has to be led by someone (Marais, 2001:49).

Samson 'sees' a plan in his head but *the servant* 'does not notice it' and takes Samson at his request to the very strategic *pillars that support the temple*¹⁴.

The narrator (Judges 16:27) again emphasises the fact that the crowd is 'looking' at him – the man who himself can no longer 'see' - a sea of faces laugh and jeer at Samson's helplessness.

In Samson's last desperate prayer (Judges 16:28), in which he uses three different titles for God, namely, *Adonai*, *Yahweh* and *Elohim* he asks for the strength to avenge the Philistines *for his two eyes* (Cundall, 1968:181). For a second and last time, Samson calls on the LORD, once again for selfish revenge (cf Judges 15:18–19). This is again a significant reference to his eyes.

And, as in the rest of the Book of Judges, the LORD could not resist his cry for help. It would seem that the Philistines were too busy celebrating to 'see' what Samson was doing. He *reached towards the two central pillars on which the temple stood* (Judges 16:29).

Paradoxically, Samson's death is his greatest victory for Yahweh (Marais, 2001:49). He dies but through his death he fulfils the purpose for which he was born, namely, to free the Israelites from Philistine oppression (Judges 13:25). Samson's revenge, accompanied by brute force and failure, is thus Yahweh's victory (Marais, 2001:49).

Conclusion

The Samson story is a complex one that employs the themes of 'to see', 'knowledge' and riddles throughout. It is therefore not strange that the listeners or readers of the story may have many questions (Crenshaw, 1978:66-69; Greenstein, 1981:246-247; Exum, 1981:4-19).

¹³ Putting out eyes or cutting off thumbs and big toes (cf Adoni-Bezek in ch 1) was one of the many ways in which you could humiliate your enemy and make sure that he would no longer be able to fight. It was also great fun for the victors to jeer at the one whose eyes had been put out.

¹⁴ Just above the pillars of the temple was a covered portico on which the important people stood and looked down on the spectacle below (cf Judges 16:27; cf a similar temple in Knossos [on the island of Crete] which was also built by the 'Sea People').



If Samson had only listened to his parents' advice and followed his mother's example of faith, discernment and seeing with spiritual eyes, he would have been able to carry out his calling successfully.

An ordinary folk tale which was retold repeatedly to children before bedtime here receives an infinitely deeper dimension: Yahweh planned everything in detail so that He would eventually achieve His purpose for Israel!

Samson did not notice (observe) any of Yahweh's plans in his life. Samson's whole life was actually a rebellion against his calling. And, surprisingly, Yahweh uses this rebellion and vengeance to break the Philistine oppression of His children (Marais, 2001:48).

His actions create the impression of a 'spoilt brat', he speaks, and his parents do his bidding. The spoilt brat has become an intolerable adult (Judges 14:9). The miracle is that God could still use him. Judged from a human perspective a failed upbringing – but from God's perspective seen as a saviour figure despite his weakness. 'My ways are not your ways', says the LORD. God does the impossible through the improbable!

Our impulsiveness, wrong choices, missed opportunities, detours, bad moods, shame, blindness and eventually our senseless death can in a way be (miraculously) woven into God's perfect plan for His Kingdom. It becomes clear in the judges' stories that God's (or the Spirit of the LORD) presence in a believer's life does not necessarily dominate his/her will. A person's strong points do not dominate one's weak points. Nevertheless, it also becomes clear that God can use someone in spite of his/her weak points.

Samson was ... a hero who 'noticed' (saw) beautiful women (Judges 14:1; 16:1), but who was 'blind' as a result of his foolish amours (Judges 16:21); of a 'superman' ... who could break unbreakable ropes four times but could not break the bonds of a web of love

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