

Biblical Musings

I

Why did Samson die in Gaza?



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 (Sasmson carrying the gate of Gaza to Hebron; Delilah cutting Samson's hair)

*Betray'd, captiv'd, and both my eyes put out,
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze...
Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him...
Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds under Philistine yoke...
John Milton, Samson agonistes*

*Gaza, the mother of all surprises
Mahmud Darwish, Immortal Gaza*

אַרְחַח חַיִּים, לְמַעַלְהָ לְמִשְׁכָּל־ -- לְמַעַן סוֹר, מִשְׁאוֹל מָטָה
(Proverbs 15:24):
The chosen path of life leads the prudent upward, away from perdition.

*Her hair is damp with fragrant mist,
The clear light chills her jade arms.
When might we both lean at that window,
A pair in the light....
Du Fu (712-770), Moonlight Night*

The hi/story of Samson occupies four chapters in the book of Judges. This is exceptionally generous. None of the “judges” recorded occupies such an expansive space. The birth of no other judge was hailed by an angel. That of Samson entailed not one but two angelic appearances.¹ Judges ordinarily become national saviors with the assistance not only of God but also of other men. Samson wages all his campaigns on his own, solely with Yahweh’s help. Several judges are accredited with countless “wives” (Judges 8:3; 10:4) and many children. Samson’s amorous affairs feature three women, each with distinct identity, each presented as agent of destruction. None bore him children.² Most of the judges apparently died of old age; none perished on the battlefield or dies in a manner worthy of commemoration.³ The circumstances of Samson’s unmaning and suicide in the heart of the enemy’s territory are minutely recorded. Why? And why does Gaza, a Philistine’s stronghold, feature so prominently and fatefully in Samson’s career?⁴

We know nothing about the upbringing of any judge. Yet, Samson’s parents were instructed to bring him up a Nazarite, particularly ensuring that his hair grows unhindered and uncut. From

¹ An angel plays a prominent role in the grooming of the young Gideon to become a “savior” (Judges 6:22) in a sequence that is replayed in the scenes surrounding the annunciation of Samson’s imminent birth.

² Jephthah constitutes another exception, assuming that the daughter he sacrificed was his only child.

³ The exception is Abimelech, considered a usurping judge, who is killed by a well-aimed slinger wielded by a woman during the siege of the tower of Tevetz (Judg 9:53)

⁴ The only other reference to Gaza in the book of Judges is in 6:4 where the city provides a marker of the destruction wrought by the Midianites throughout the Israelite settlements “till the [border] of Gaza”.

the very beginning of the biblical survey of Samson's career, his hair and the promise of national salvation are inextricably linked. Yet Samson's first demonstration of his legendary strength is executed without a single witness when he kills a lion's cub on the way to woo a woman in Timnah (Judges 14:6). His second show of prowess did take place in public, but not on the battlefield against Philistines. To fulfill a promise of a substantial reward for solving his wedding riddle (Judges 14:13) Samson shows up in Ashkelon, a Philistine city, where he kills and strips unsuspecting thirty men (Judges 14:19).⁵ Both actions are specifically accompanied by "the spirit of God" (Judges 14:6; 14:19). Another killing spree, on a much larger scale and in public, involves a veritable show of gigantism. Holding an ass jaw, Samson kills a thousand Philistines, unequivocally displaying his divinely bestowed strength, the source of which eludes all spectators, Philistines and Judahites alike (Judges 15:14). Somewhat paradoxically, he also nearly dies of thirst right afterwards but for an emergency divine intervention (Judges 15:15-19).

At the conclusion of these feats the biblical editor dryly states that "in the days of the Philistines, Samson judged Israel for twenty years" (Judges 15:20), a statement that, exceptionally, appears not once but twice.⁶ It ordinarily serves to conclude a judge's career.⁷ In Samson's case the first "concluding comment" points to an end without an ending, a "great salvation" (Judges 15:18) that did not release the Israelites from Philistine domination. At the very end of the Samson story, the same concluding note referring to twenty years as a "judge" underlines his failure to achieve both salvation and peace.

Why, then, does Gaza feature so prominently in a story of a man of the Danite tribe who loved Philistine women and who delighted in exhibiting his gigantic strength? Why does this Philistine urban hub provide the ultimate site of triumph and of defeat?

Let me begin with a digression into gigantism, specifically a recollection of a host of biblical "giants" evoked by Samson's own gigantic feats. No other judge is endowed with Samson's physis. None could be enrolled in an honor list of "giants", men whom the Bible endows with attributes reflecting their appearance, origin, and unusual strength. Biblical "giants" bear various epithets, all unfortunately translated into English as "giants". In the Bible they are carefully differentiated. There are "giants" who are called *Rephaim* (shady/ghastly/underworldly) (Genesis

⁵ Neither Timnah, home of Samson's ill-fated bride, nor Ashkelon appear to have been haphazard choices as initial stages of Samson's public performances. Ashkelon is recorded as a locality that Judah had captured (Judges 1:18). But generations later it is apparently inhabited by Philistines. Timnah had been the scene of a near fatal encounter of another "couple", the widowed Judah and Tamar, his own daughter-in-law (Genesis 38). It hardly seems that Samson's problematic presence in Philistine Timnah and Ashkelon denotes the start of collective Israelite redemption. But the 1/30 odds provides an early and public display of Samson's "gigantic" prowess.

⁶ The eighty years period following Ehud's victory over the Moabites (Judges 3:30); the forty years of "peace" following the feats of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5:31); the four decades of Gideon's judging (Judg 8:28); twenty three years of Tola (Judges 10:2); twenty two of Yair (Judge 10:3); and eight years of Jephtah's judging Israel (Judges 12:14)

⁷ Judges 12:7 (Jephtah); 12:12 (Eilon); 12:14 solely the yearly count: for an addition of "peaceful period", Judges 8:28 (Gideon); 5:31 (Deborah).

14:5); *Zuzim* and *Emim* (scary; noisy (Genesis 14); and *Nephilim* (the fallen).⁸ The last category is the most interesting.

The *Nephilim* emerge in Genesis as descendants of two rounds of serial intercourse between angels and humans, hence they are men “fallen” from heaven. *Nephilim* are further characterized as men of heroic stature (*gibborim anshe hashem*)(Genesis 6:4). No Israelite, not even Samson, is accorded any of the epithets that accrued to giants. Even Saul, the first Israelite king, specifically noted by his gigantic size is not called a “giant”. But his father, Kish, is designated as a “hero/giant” (*gibbor khail*)(1 Sam 9:1-2), a term used for *Nephilim*.⁹

As a group, the *Nephilim* reemerge in the annals of the Israelite planned invasion of Canaan. The description presented by the spies sent by Moses to explore the nature of the land and its inhabitants (Numbers 13) describe the locals as “giants” (*Nephilim anshei midot*), men of such size that, by comparison, the invading Israelites were mere grasshoppers (Numbers 13:32-3). The stronghold of these *Nephilim* (further characterized as sons of The Giant (*Anak*) in Numbers 13:28), was the hilly area of Hebron (Numbers 13:22), a locality destined to play a significant role in biblical annals. We are told that the conquest led by Joshua was so successful that all the Canaanite giants (*anakim*) living in the heartland of Hebron/Kiryat Arba were eliminated (Josh 11:21; 14:12). All but one crucial exception: the “giants” (*Anakim*) of Gaza, Gath and Ashdod, three Philistine cities, remained unscathed and unconquered (Joshua 11:22).

Two observations can be proposed: No group of giants in any of these three cities is recorded anywhere else in the Bible.¹⁰ The only active “giant” in these parts of the land is Samson. The three cities, bastions of the formerly Hebronite giants, remained unconquered. Samson’s rise to prominence coincides with Philistine domination over the Israelites.¹¹ How did biblical narrators weave a story connecting Hebron and Gaza? They did it through planting Samson, somewhat abruptly, in Gaza, and in search of sex. No other reason is provided to account for Samson’s sudden presence in Philistine Gaza, least of all a desire to save his fellow religionists from foreign domination.

The episode delineating Samson’s first venture into Gaza is a wonderful example of the narrative economy of the tellers of Samson’s tale: Samson shows up in Gaza. He mates with a local sex worker.¹² The locals set up a trap to kill him. He foils their plan by simply leaving her bed

⁸ J. Jrasovec, *The Transformation of Biblical Proper Names* (2010), 63-5; B. R. Doak, “Biblical Giants as Monsters”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Monsters*, eds. Brandon R. Grafius and John W. Morehead (2025), 99-116 with ample bibliography.

⁹ Equally mystifying is the absence of any of the “gigantic” epithets in the description of the most famous Philistine “giant”, Goliath of Gath. As in the case of Og, the Bible provides precise measurements not only of Goliath’s physical size but also of the exceptional weight of his armament (I Sam 17:4-7). Nowhere, however, is Goliath endowed with any of the epithets that the Hebrew Bible ordinarily applies to “giants”.

¹⁰ Even the Goliath of Gath is not described as a “giant”.

¹¹ Due to its harbor and advantageous location, Gaza continued to be a highly important city throughout antiquity, rising as the most important urban center of Christian intellectual activities in late antiquity.

¹² one characterized as a Gazan prostitute (*zona*), the other as a woman (*isha*) from Soreq named Dalilah. The former was likely meant to invoke Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho who had saved the lives of two Israelite spies (Joshua 2), the latter harked back to the primordial woman who is consistently named Woman (Gen 2:22-23; 3:2-3) and who is cast as the proverbial agent of subversion and separation.

sooner than expected. And he marches out of the city with its gate on his shoulders. This is, of course, a striking demonstration of Samson's gigantic prowess. City gates in antiquity were carefully constructed. They were imposing, symbolizing the city's wealth and stature by providing control over all traffic. What does Samson do with this inordinate burden (beautifully illustrated in the image shown above)? He carries the gate all the way to Hebron, a long way away from Gaza. And he deposits it atop the mountain facing Hebron (Judges 16:3). This, too, is a striking symbolic gesture. It provides closure to the narrative of the conquest led by Joshua—an Israelite giant robs Gaza of its gigantic gate to undermine the remaining “giants” of Gaza.

Here, too, is a story that could have served as perfect conclusion to the unusual career of the wandering Israelite “giant”. But such an ending would have belied the pre-birth promise of national salvation. Neither the transfer of the gate of Gaza to Hebron nor Samson's repeated killing of Philistines achieve this goal. Above all, the crucial search for the precise source of Samson's gigantic power has remained outside the perimeter of the narrative. Where, exactly, did Samson's divinely bestowed strength reside in his human body? Were giants gigantic because of their size? Their armament? Their semi-divine status? Whence did “giants” derive their uncommon size and strength? How lasting was “gigantism” and how effective? Who was capable of overcoming a “giant”? Did it take one “giant” to defeat another “giant”? The only answer ever provided is linked with the story of Samson. And, yet again, with Gaza.

Samson: The Improbable “Giant”?

Once only does the Bible contemplate the precise site of a “giant”'s superhuman strength. The answer is clear, if odd. What makes a “giant” “gigantic” is his hair, the most detachable part of the human body and, paradoxically, also its only ever renewable component. It is visible yet secretive, demonstrative yet concealed. The fate of Samson's hair, the site of his “gigantism”, is deposited in the hands of two women, the mother who ensures its unhindered growth in Samson's childhood, and the lover who cuts it off in his adulthood. One Israelite, and one Philistine.

It seems hardly a coincidence that the yarn of biblical “gigantism”, launched in Genesis with “giants” born of intercourse between semi-divine beings and mortal women, and continuing through the vanquished “giants” of Hebron, gains a final twist through Samson's braids. And I would argue that only in Gaza, the allegedly last bastion of the “giants” of the land (Joshua 11:22), could the final “gigantic” act be performed, paradoxically by an Israelite “giant” who also must die in the process.

Because the story of Samson fails to provide a clearcut answer to the manner of achieving national salvation, it must resume. Samson's hair is still intact. As is his sexual appetite. In the last recorded phase of his life Samson is in love (Judges 16:4). Once again a woman is the chosen agent of unmanning.¹³ All three women in Samson's story are made to perform

¹³ However, the fact that the amount of the proposed bribe is not only provided but also is the exact same amount used to launch an episode directly following Samson's saga (Judges 17:1), suggests serious confusion between the two narratives and the likelihood that the reference to a bribe was inserted as a bridge of transitioning from one

according to a predictable mold. They yield to pressure exerted by Samson's enemies. They use the few female armaments at their disposal, namely tears and pleas, to "tempt" and to "pester" (Judges 14:17; 16:16). When they are heard, their words are uniquely female: "How can you tell me that you love me when your heart is not with me?" (Judges 16:15), precisely what biblical narrators define as "female love" (אַהֲבַת נָשִׁים), clearly distinguishable from love between men (2 Samuel 1:26). Samson's narrative transforms women into beacons of duplicity. Functioning in the circumscribed space of a bed, they are keys of unimagined delights but also of perfidy. Women facilitate an exchange between males. But they only act to orders by men. Samson's bride acts under threat of death. Dalilah is made to obey through a generous bribe of an amount so large that it is expected to satisfy not only humans but also gods (Judges 16:5; 17:3). This is hardly haphazard. It is a "gigantic" amount that reflects Samson's value for the Philistines. Shorn of hair, Samson wants to die. Becoming an ordinary mortal does not fit a "giant" divinely destined to save his people. At the very moment of unmaning, Samson fails to realize that "Yahweh left him" (Judges 16:20). God, temporarily at least, was on Dalilah's side.

Shaven and helpless, Samson is blinded, bonded and taken to Gaza. Here, too, the biblical chain of events is deliberate. The "giant" who had robbed Gaza of its gate must die in the city designated as the bastion of the original giants of the land. Yet, as before, the Bible resists a closure. The image of the blind giant that imprinted itself on Milton's poetic mind had no appeal to the biblical narrator. A man destined to save Israel has yet to fulfil his destiny.

When Samson's hair grows, apparently and oddly unnoticed, he recoups his "gigantic" capability. Brought out of prison on a day celebrating Dagon, the chief Philistine deity, Samson is stationed between the temple pillars, a location intended to recall the robbing of the city gate. For the last time, Samson challenges Yahweh with an appeal to revenge, not for oppressing the Israelites but for robbing Samson of eyesight (Judges 16:28). The temple is toppled. Samson dies in the act, as do countless celebrating Philistines. This was a suicide befitting a "giant", a performance that could have been enacted only in Gaza.

At the start of the Samson saga, an angel declares that Samson "will begin to save the Israelites from the Philistines" (Judges 13:5). But even his gigantic feats secure only twenty years of "judging". In the biblical annals of judges this was no more than a temporary respite. The death of Samson is followed not by combatting Philistines but by a civil war that nearly decimates the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 17-21). Unsurprisingly, the book of Judges ends on a somber, and repeated observation: "In those days there was no king in Israel. A man did whatever he deemed right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Precisely as Samson had done, to no effect.

Israelite protagonist to another, both illustrating the lawless state of monarch-less people. Cf. the same strategy of eliciting confession via temptation, Judges 14:15; 16:5).

Giants are doomed to die in Gaza