

Judges 14:4—Yahweh uses Samson to provoke the Philistines

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ABSTRACT

*Judges 14:4 presents an often overlooked hermeneutical key to the Samson story. It declares that Yahweh intended Samson's mission to provoke conflict between Israelites and Philistines. The context is potential Israelite assimilation to impressive, attractive Philistine society. The verse is set in context and analyzed in detail, including the hapax noun, *חאנָה*.*

A INTRODUCTION

The Samson story in Judg 13-16 is fascinating. There are sex and violence, influential women, and a deeply flawed hero. Naturally, commentators cluster.¹ It is not just the inherent interest and complexity of the story that attract them, however. The Samson story seems to lack a clear "hermeneutical key."² It does not seem to fit neatly into the overall structure of the Book of Judges. Perhaps what has been missing is appreciation of a curious, often-overlooked,³ editorial comment in Judg 14:4:

וְאָבִיו וְאָמוֹ לֹא יְדַעַו כִּי מֵיהֶה הוּא כִּי תָּנָה הָוּא מִבְקָשׁ
מִפְלִשְׁתִּים וּבְעֵת הִיא פָּלָשְׁתִּים מְשֻׁלְּם בִּישראל

*Now his father and his mother did not realize this was from Yahweh, who was seeking to provoke the Philistines. At that time the Philistines were ruling Israel.*⁴

This verse does much to place the Samson story in its canonical context: the narrator brings Yahweh's point of view to the reader and highlights a sur-

¹ Victor H. Matthews, "Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson narrative," *PRSt* 16/3 (1989): 245 helpfully summarises the varying approaches of commentators in English of the previous decade or so. David M. Gunn provides an extensive survey of commentators Jewish and Christian from ancient to modern in David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 172-230.

² J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1987), 228; cf. Matthews, "Freedom and Entrapment," 245.

³ When not overlooked, the verse is most often seen as indicating a tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the Samson narrative, cf. Gunn, *Judges*, 197-198; Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 155; James A. Wharton, "Secret of Yahweh: Story and Affirmation in Judges 13-16," *Int* 27/1 (1973): 55; cf. Cheryl J. Exum, "The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga," *VT* 33/1 (1983), 30-45.

⁴ Translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

rising danger. Yahweh wanted to stop not just oppression but assimilation. He used Samson's checkered career to provoke conflict between his people and the Philistines, lest Israelites fascinated by Philistine culture and technology lose their distinctive identity as worshippers of Yahweh alone.

This article will consider in turn, moving from general to specific: Israelite-Philistine relations in the Bible and beyond; the Samson story within the Book of Judges; and then the details of Judg 14:4 and its context within the Samson story.

B ISRAELITE-PHILISTINE RELATIONS IN THE BIBLE AND BEYOND

Judges 14:4 will strike most readers of the Bible as odd. Everyone who has heard the story of David and Goliath "knows" that the Philistines were enemies of the Israelites, and some of their worst ones at that. (In English, "philistine" has become an epithet of abuse, like "vandal" and "hun." The names of other famous enemies, like "canaanite," "hittite," "assyrian," and "babylonian," have escaped this fate.) The entire book of 1 Samuel, with its struggle to establish monarchy in Israel, has battles with the Philistines as its backdrop. Eli's sons are killed fighting them in 1 Sam 4; Saul and his sons die at Gilboa in 1 Sam 31. Indeed, struggles against Philistines continue to the time of the Exile (Jer 47:1-4, Ezek 24:15-16) and beyond (Zech 9:6).

But careful reading of Judges and, indeed, of 1 Samuel, will show that it was by no means automatic that Philistines were enemies. The overall picture is much more nuanced than David and Goliath might make one think. David himself, of course, fled from Saul to the Philistine city of Gath (where Goliath came from!) and lived at Ziklag as a vassal of Gath's king (1 Sam 27). Later in his career, Philistine soldiers were at the core of the troops that kept him in power despite Absalom's attempted coup (2 Sam 15:18). Even during Saul's reign, Israelites are presented as not only having frequent, peaceful contact with the Philistines, but in fact depending on their superior, Iron Age technology: "But every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, or his sickle" (1 Sam 13:20, ESV).

Conflict between Israelites and Philistines seems, indeed, to have been neither automatic nor inevitable. Both peaceful interaction and admiring imitation were among the options being used, as the Samson stories assume. McCann's comment is, "While the narrator seems to recognize the Philistines as oppressors, the people do not."⁵ As Chisholm puts it, "The people had come

⁵ J. Clinton McCann, *Judges* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 94.

to accept the Philistines as their overlords and no longer desired relief."⁶

In the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Joshua and Judges, there is a conquest refrain about the land of Canaan. Fifteen times, with variations, it is called a place of "the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites" (Exod 3:8; cf. 3:17, 13:5, 23:23, 23:28, 33:2, 34:11, Deut 7:1, 20:17, Josh 3:10, 9:1, 11:3, 12:8, 24:11, Judg 3:5). What is striking is that the Philistines, such prominent enemies in the early monarchical period, never make it onto these lists of enemies to be dispossessed. Plausibly, this is because the Philistines were not long-time inhabitants of Canaan. Like the Israelites themselves, they were seen as a new influence. It is also plausible that Israelites would have initially viewed them more positively than those who were on the conquest list.⁷

External, archaeological evidence for the Philistines is (predictably) highly contested, with sharply opposing maximalist and minimalist opinions.⁸ Nonetheless, it complements the nuanced biblical account. It is fairly well established that the Philistines were a new influence in Canaan in the latter part of the second millennium, during the complex time of transition from Bronze to Iron Ages.⁹ As one group among the Sea Peoples, they had links to the ancestors of the Greeks and introduced exotic Aegean cultural elements.¹⁰ Dominating the southern coastal plain and with much influence into the highlands, they were a sophisticated urban culture, with an edge in military technology over the inland peoples.¹¹ Their city planning was distinctive, with, "carefully conceived and executed settlements."¹² It is not hard to imagine that

⁶ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "What's Wrong with this Picture? Stylistic Variation as a Rhetorical Technique in Judges," *JSOT* 34/2 (2009): 177. By contrast, John E. Hamlin, *Judges: At Risk in the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 129, portrays the Philistine threat as over-whelmingly military.

⁷ "Five lords of the Philistines" are mentioned in Judg 3:3 prominently among the nations left in the land to test Israel—but they still don't make it onto the conquest list that follows in Judg 3:5. Of course, most of the enemies and oppressors in the book of Judges are not on the list of Canaanite peoples to conquer. They are, however, introduced with standard phrases distinct from those used for the Philistines.

⁸ Cf. William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁹ Jean-Pierre Isbouts, *The Biblical World: An Illustrated Atlas* (Washington: National Geographic, 2007), 160-167.

¹⁰ Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300-1100 B.C.E.* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 231.

¹¹ Carl S. Ehrlich, *The Philistines in Transition: A History from ca. 1000-730 B.C.E.*, (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 21; Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What is remembered and What is Forgotten in Israel's History," *JBL* 122/2 (2003): 412-420.

¹² Ehrlich, *Philistines in Transition*, 18.

Israelites viewed them with fascination and envy.

Thus, Yadin seeks to understand the puzzle of Samson's "riddle" in Judg 14 in the context of Mycenaean, proto-Greek cultural patterns.¹³ Wedding customs that appear anomalous in other Israelite contexts can be understood in that light. These speculations cannot be proved, but it is clear in the wedding story of Judg 14 that Samson was not a total outsider to the Philistines. However much his parents may have despised the Philistines as "uncircumcised," there is no record of Philistine rejection of Samson. More significant than that argument from silence is Samson's proposing and playing the "riddle" game at the wedding feast. A contest of words implies a considerable amount of language and culture in common (unlike a contest of physical strength, which it might be imagined Samson would have been rather good at).

C THE SAMSON STORY WITHIN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The book of Judges has a clear overall structure, in two parts, chapters 1-16 and 17-21. The Israelite conquest of Canaan under Joshua has been left incomplete. Israelites now live in close proximity with peoples who do not serve Yahweh. The ideals of elimination (Deut 7:2, Josh 10:34-44, 11:11) and complete separation (Exod 34:12-16, Deut 7:3-6) give way to a more complex, compromised reality (already amply signaled in the book of Joshua, cf. 9:26-27; 11:22; 13:1-7).

In the first, and larger, part of the book, this sets up a cyclical pattern: Israelites follow other gods; Yahweh then, "gives/sells them into the hand of" an oppressing power; the people פָּנִים "cry out" to Yahweh; he raises up a "judge" to deliver them; the "judge" leads people to a victory over the enemy; for a while all is well. Then the pattern repeats.

The final section of Judges is structured by its own theme and refrain: In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (17:6, 21:25; cf. 18:1, 19:1). Anarchy prepared the way for monarchy.

The Samson story is the last, climactic cycle in the "judge" pattern and the hero's somewhat anarchic life prepares the transition to the second part of the book. (In Samson's first speech, just before Judg 14:4, he rejects his parent's authority and declares: She is right in my eyes—both theme and phrase are foreshadows of what will come.)

As the final "judge" story, Samson's is fittingly much more extensive and detailed than any other. But the cyclical pattern is incomplete. It begins in

¹³ Azzan Yadin, "Samson's *hîdâ*," *VT* 52/3 (2002): 416-418; cf. Othniel Margalith, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks," *VT* 36/2 (1986): 228-229; Othniel Margalith, "Short Notes: Samson's Foxes," *VT* 35/2 (1985): 227; Othniel Margalith, "More Samson Legends," *VT* 36/4 (1986), 397-405.

13:1 with the typical markers: again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of Yawheh, so he gave them into the hand of the Philistines.

ויספו בני ישראל לעשות הרע בעיני יהוה
ויתנמ יהוה ביד פלשתים ארבעים שנה

But, this time there is no *זעק*, no crying out to Yahweh (as in 3:9,15; 6:6,7; 10:10,14). A child is given (unasked for), but he will only *begin* to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines (13:5).

והוא יחל להושיע את ישראל מיד פלשתים

He never leads anyone in battle. When he has a great opportunity to do so (15:11-13), meeting up with 3000 fighting men from Judah, they do not follow him. They bind him and hand him over to the Philistines. Samson is twice described as “judging” (better: leading) Israel for twenty years, but that is explicitly “in the days of the Philistines.” Implicitly, they are the ones ruling at the time (15:20):

וישפט את ישראל בימי פלשתים עשרים שנה

In the Samson stories, he always acts on his own in Philistine-dominated territory and, fittingly, that is how he dies (16:23-31).

The breakdown of the cyclical pattern of the first part of Judges in the Samson story prepares the way for the second part of the book.¹⁴ It also prepares on a larger scale for the rise of the Davidic monarchy in 1 and 2 Samuel. David’s legitimacy as a true heir of Joshua would be confirmed by his completing what Samson had only begun: subduing the Philistines (2 Sam 8:1).

These structural considerations are, however, not wholly satisfying. It seems odd that so much space would be devoted to a maverick and his incomplete mission, no matter how entertaining he, and the women he meets, are. This is where Judg 14:4 demands close attention. Samson’s mission is not quite what it might seem.

D JUDGES 14:4 IN DETAIL

This verse is a parenthetical comment, standing outside the main narrative of the chapter. The standard narrative pattern is a sequence of *wayyiqtol* verbs heading each clause (14:1—2x, 14:2—3x, 14:3—2x, 14:5—2x, 14:6—2x, 14:7—3x, and so on¹⁵). Judges 14:4, however, begins with “his father and his

¹⁴ Note also Chisholm, “What’s Wrong,” 178: “The stylistic variation signals the overall incongruity and irony of the story.”

¹⁵ Though the direct speech of vv. 2 and 3 shows characteristic variety; cf. Robert A. Dooley and Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Analyzing Discourse: A Manual of Basic Concepts* (Dallas: SIL, 2001), 4-6.

mother," then a negated *qatal* verb. The switch to SVO structure does not particularly emphasise the parents. It does make clear the break from narrative to comment from the narrator.

The parents "did not know," did not realise, what Yahweh was doing. This is not a particular failing of Samson's parents. It is the condition of many other participants in the Samson story (13:16; 15:11; 16:9, 20) and throughout Judges¹⁶ (2:10; 3:1,2; 11:39; 20:34¹⁷). "Knowledge of the Lord's actions is of paramount importance for the characters to assess their situation properly, but is not always accessible to them."¹⁸ In Judg 14:4, the reader is being given the privilege of Yahweh's point of view as the narrator understands it and none of the characters do, which calls sharp attention to what is to be said.

Then, כִּי is used two times to introduce what Samson's parents did not know. The first time: כִּי מִיהוּה הִיא. "She" or "it," was from Yahweh. The feminine form could refer to the Philistine who has so captured Samson's fancy or to the situation his stubborn fancy is creating, but neither option much changes the point: it might seem to Samson's parents (and it might well be the case) that it is Samson's fault or perhaps the girl's fault, nevertheless Yahweh himself is at work. The second כִּי introduces what Yahweh is actually doing, but this clause has proved challenging to translate:

כִּי תֹּאֵן הָא מַבְקֵשׁ מְפָלָשִׁים

It is not quite clear what Yahweh was seeking נ, from or with the Philistines. A broad selection of translations published in English, French and Portuguese gives a reasonable sense of the range of scholarly opinions,¹⁹ and the variation is an indication of some awkwardness in understanding the original. Several translations use the language of "opportunity," usually with a negative preposition like "against."²⁰ Others use "occasion" with similar prepositions.²¹ Colloquially, the same idea is put as a "chance to fight" in the Good News Bible. An alternative is that Yahweh was looking for a "pretext."²² Somewhat similar is "sujet de querelle" in the Nouvelle Bible de Jérusalem. The Common

¹⁶ Cf. Cheryl J. Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga." *JSOT* 19 (1981): 8.

¹⁷ The example in 21:12 has a different meaning and is a poor parallel.

¹⁸ Jeremy Schipper, "Narrative Obscurity of Samson's HYDH in Judges 14.14 and 18," *JSOT* 27/3 (2003): 344.

¹⁹ Curiously, commentaries do not discuss the translation of this noun, but reflect these same established options.

²⁰ English Standard Version, New Living Translation, Revised English Bible, Nova Tradução na Linguagem de Hoje.

²¹ New International Version, La Bible en Français Courant, Nova Versão Internacional, Almeida Revista e Atualizada, Almeida Revista e Corrigida.

²² New Revised Standard Version, New Jewish Publication Society. Cf. "trouver un prétexte," Didier Luciani, "Samson: l'amour rend aveugle," *VT* 59/2 (2009): 324.

English Version Revised takes a different approach, however: he "wanted to stir up trouble for them."

It should be noted that the majority of these translations rather stretch the preposition **מ** by construing it as "against," rather from "from" or "with." This may indicate something problematic in translating the main noun in question.

Prominently fronted, the object of the clause, **חֲנָה**, is a *hapax legomenon*. The verb from the same root, **אָנָה** (III) is used just four times in Biblical Hebrew.²³ According to Koehler and Baumgartner, three times it means cause (*pi'el*, Exod 21:13) or allow (*pu'al*, Ps 91:10; Prov 12:21) to happen.²⁴ Once, as a participle in the *hitpa'el*, it means to try to pick a quarrel²⁵ (2 Kgs 5:7):

וְרָאֹ כִּי מַתְאָנָה הוּא לִי

This is the king of Israel's reaction to a letter from the king of Aram asking him to have Naaman healed. Since healing leprosy is impossible, the letter must be a ploy to give the Arameans an excuse for war.

Apparently by analogy, Koehler and Baumgartner suggest that the noun form here in Judg 14:4 should be translated as "occasion, reason, with **בְּקַשׁ** to seek an occasion (for a quarrel)."²⁶ The analogy is weakened, however, by two details: the verse in 2 Kings does not use **בְּקַשׁ** and the preposition is **ל**, not **מ**.

The context in Judges is a greater problem. Whether Yahweh is like the Aramean king and looking for a pretext to act, or merely an occasion or opportunity,²⁷ these translations all seem odd. Yahweh has shown no hesitation throughout Judges to act against the oppressors of his people. He has needed no pretext or excuse and tends to make his opportunities rather than look for them.

Ancient versions suggest a different solution, though it is no more satisfactory. The LXX translates that the Lord was seeking **ανταποδομα** (payback) **εκ** (from) the outsiders. The Old Latin similarly uses, "return."²⁸ However, this language of revenge is problematic since there is no Philistine provocation in the immediate context.

²³ The root is, however, clearly attested in Arabic, Michael A. Grisanti "אָנָה," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (vol. 1 ; ed. William van Gemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 448.

²⁴ *HALOT*, ad loc.

²⁵ *HALOT*, ad loc: "to seek an opportunity (for battle)."

²⁶ *HALOT*, ad loc, cf. Grisanti, "אָנָה," 448: "opportunity for confrontation."

²⁷ These latter terms may be chosen to avoid implying that Yahweh was being disingenuous.

²⁸ Cf. Niditch, *Judges*, 152.

Clearly, the root does show that Yahweh intends to make something happen. For greater precision, it is the final clause of Judg 14:4 that gives essential context in the interpretation of *תְּאֵנָה*. It states:

ובעת הִיא פְּלִשְׁתִּים מְשֻׁלִּים בִּישראל

At that time [the] Philistines were ruling Israel.

The key word here is the participle **משֻׁלִּים**, describing an ongoing situation. It is a neutral term for political overlordship and is not used about any of the oppressors and enemies that recur throughout Judges. The first four uses of the root **משל** in Judges are in chapter 8:22-23. The men of Israel request Gideon “to rule over us,” setting up a hereditary monarchy because of “his” victory over Midian. Gideon rejects the offer for himself and his sons, asserting that it is Yahweh who rules. It next appears, twice, in the propaganda of Abimelech, a son of Gideon keen to set himself up as ruler over Shechem (in thorough contradiction of his father’s earlier assertion). Finally, it is used twice as a plural participle referring to the Philistines, here in 14:4 and also in 15:11, in the rhetorical question by the men of Judah: “Don’t you know that the Philistines are ruling us?” A fighting force of 3000 men is not in the least interested in following Samson into battle. They do not want conflict and are happy to sacrifice Samson in order to preserve Philistine rule.

In the wider context, **משל** can refer (in Josh 12:2 and 5) to the rule of Sihon and Og, or (in 2 Sam 23:3) to Yahweh’s challenge to David to rule justly. In 1 Kgs 5:1 it refers to Solomon’s rule over the whole kingdom. **משל** is routinely followed by the preposition **בְּ**, indicating those ruled. This word is not a synonym for oppression. The key question is who does it and how it is done. Strikingly, there is no comment or even hint in Judges that the Philistines are doing it badly.

Rather, it is implied that Philistines were established rulers over Israelites (not necessarily all Israel) and that there were no ongoing hostilities. It is this situation that Yahweh seeks to change with *תְּאֵנָה*. As already noted, the CEVR translates here: “the Lord wanted to stir up trouble for them.” It would be even better to replace “for” with “with”: the Lord wanted to stir up trouble with them. In more formal English, the key phrase might be: “sought to provoke [a conflict].” Israelites are peacefully living with Philistines and under Philistine dominance. Now the reader is being told that Yahweh used Samson to break up this acquiescence and replace it with conflict.

E CONCLUSION

In this light, the succeeding stories of Samson’s exploits can be seen as a divinely-driven cycle of mutual provocation, as one incident escalates into the next. It is ironic that Samson declares (15:7):

כִּי אֵם נִקְמָתִי בְּכֶם וְאַחֲרֵךְ אָחֶל

Only I will be avenged on them and afterward I will stop.

It is precisely the stopping that is so hard. The Philistines, when challenged by the men of Judah, (15:10) explain:

עלינו לעשות לו כאשר עשה לנו

We came up to do to him just as he has done to us.

And Samson uses almost the same words one verse later (15:11):

כaspers עשו לי כן עשית להם

Just as they did to me, so I have done to them.

As Samson and the Philistines are locked into this pattern of mutual provocation, Yahweh’s larger purpose is being achieved: a climate of acceptance and interchange in which the Philistines (and their gods) dominate is being changed into one in which struggle is the norm.²⁹

Steve Weitzman has analyzed the Samson story as an example of “border fiction.”³⁰ His focus is on the way this kind of story creates a space and a separation between groups. A border is not just there; it has to be made. In the same vein, Gregory Mobley writes of Samson as a “liminal hero.”³¹ Such approaches acknowledge the dynamic to which Judg 14:4 points: It was by no means obvious that Israelites and Philistines were and would remain distinct. Samson is an instrument for separation to prevent absorption. It is not, in the canonical text, a question of ethnic purity (cf. Rahab of Jericho and Caleb the Kenite) but of Yahweh’s exclusive demands (Exod 34:10-17; Deut 7:1-6).

Our world multiplies painful examples of mutual provocation exacerbating conflict. It hardly seems helpful to call positive attention to that pattern! Yet those called to be God’s distinctive people in a multi-cultural world need to ask themselves to what they are assimilating. In Judg 14:4, Yahweh preferred conflict to assimilation.

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²⁹ Chisholm’s understanding is close to this view, See Chisholm, “What’s Wrong;” also Robert B. Chisholm, “Identity Crisis: Assessing Samson’s Birth and Career,” *BSac* 166/662 (2009): 147-162.

³⁰ Steve Weitzman, “The Samson Story as Border Fiction,” *BibInt* 10/2 (2002): 158.

³¹ Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 36; cf. “meaningful boundaries” in Bloch-Smith, “Israelite Ethnicity,” 412.

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