

Dangerous Liaisons: Delilah's Story

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Betrayal

“Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” (Judges 16:20)

There is no greater crime than betrayal.

Whatever horrors and indignities might be visited on the physical body, betrayal still cuts the deepest wounds of all. In biblical history this principle culminates in the betrayal of the gentle Son of Man, and Son of God, via one described as “the son of perdition,” the former apostle, Judas Iscariot.

Delilah’s story is one of betrayal, arguably the precedential betrayal in scripture. Most who’ve heard the story from Sunday school days are taught the only betrayal is hers, when she sells her lover Samson, Israel’s Judge and fearsome warrior, into the hands of the Philistine Lords. More careful reading suggests a more complex tale. Delilah may be more a victim to the Philistine Lords’ political machinations even than Samson was to her or them. And where Samson is partially master of his own demise through his own recklessness and hubris, Delilah is trapped from the outset, and given no room to maneuver as she is steered towards her doom.

Her story is inextricably woven with Samson’s, and some might see Delilah in a supporting role in Samson’s life, rather than a “Leading” character in her own right. Yet Samson’s story is under female direction from the outset. In an unusual reversal of precedence, the angel describing Samson’s destiny reveals it to his mother, not his father Manoah (Jdg 13:3). She certainly seems the more level-headed parent, as others note.¹ When Manoah realizes he was talking with an angel he panics hysterically, thinking God will kill him for having “seen God,” and it takes some calm reasoning from his wife to reassure him that that would be a completely

¹ Michael O’Connor, “The Women in the Book of Judges,” Hebrew Annual Review 1986, 10, p280

illogical thing for God to do (Jdg 13:22-23). In the same way that Samson's mother has to lead Manoah, Delilah too will come to hold Samson's reins.

Who is Delilah? She lives in the valley of Sorek, in the Philistine-occupied tribal territory of Dan (Jdg 16:4), identified as Wadi es-Sarar, west of Jerusalem.² Sorek is occupied territory, so Delilah could be either Israelite or Philistine. I believe Israelite is more likely, because when Samson previously formed alliance with a Philistine woman at Timnah, her nationality deeply grieved his parents (Jdg 14:3), yet no mention is made of similar grief in Delilah's case. Mieke Bal reasons Delilah is a woman of standing, for two reasons: she is introduced without the qualification of being someone's daughter, and she is an unmarried woman with her own house.³ Delilah's ownership of property mirrors characters we've seen already: Rahab has her own house in Jericho (Jos 2:1),⁴ Deborah judges Israel under "Deborah's Palm" (Jdg 4:5),⁵ and Jael has her own tent among the itinerant Kenites (Jdg 4:17).⁶ These facts are delivered quietly, but they testify that each woman has broken cultural shackles to be someone of standing in their community: Leading Ladies all.

A Danger Foretold

Samson's Achilles heel was his attraction to women; it formed a genuine vulnerability to his performance as a godly Judge in Israel. Every story about him is centered on his involvement with a woman, often inappropriately so, and how it triggers broader tension and discord. I suggest there is a verse where this vulnerability is actually encoded and predicted.

Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. (Jdg 14:5)

Timnah is already marked with the scent of inappropriate relationship, being the place of Judah's exploitation of Tamar.⁷ The literal facts are that a lion sprang out of a vineyard, which is

² Robert G. Boling, "Judges," in "The Anchor Bible," Eds. William F. Albright & David N. Freedman, 1975, p248

³ Mieke Bal, "Rhetoric of Subjectivity," *Poetics Today* 1984, 5, 2, p356

⁴ <https://www.pressjournal.org/midwife-in-israel-rahabs-story-text>, accessed Jul 2022

⁵ <https://www.pressjournal.org/mother-in-israel-deborahs-story-text>, accessed Jul 2022

⁶ <https://www.pressjournal.org/serpent-slayer-jaels-story-text>, accessed Jul 2022

⁷ <https://www.pressjournal.org/the-god-of-widows-tamars-story-text>, accessed Jul 2022

an oddity. I live in California, which has a relative proliferation of both mountain lions and vineyards, and I'm well aware that lions don't tend to enter vineyards, because there's very little cover and too many hallmarks and scents of humans. Further, it seems an innocuous fact to preserve. Surely the attack would've been the same from a rocky outcrop or tall grass, so why do we need to know the lion sprang from a vineyard? Why does the vineyard detail need to be preserved as the origin of the lion's charge?

I suggest the detail is preserved for its symbolic meaning. Biblically, a lion represents a powerful killer, for obvious reasons. Most memorable is the lion's den of Daniel's day, in which an angel intervened to save Daniel, but in which the lions later consumed his accusers (Dan 6). Symbolically, God is represented as a lion (Hos 5:13-14), as is the devil (1 Pet 5:8), and while God and the devil occupy opposite ends of the moral spectrum, both can be powerful killers, which justifies the symbol in both cases.

A vineyard is a biblical symbol of a fertile woman. Israel is described both as God's vineyard (Isa 5:1-7; 1:8; Amos 4:9; 9:14), and God's bride (Ezk 16; Rev 19), establishing the connection of bride to vineyard. As an independent verification, the Bible uses blood as a symbol for life (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:11,14; Dt 12:23) and wine as a symbol for blood (Mt 26:27-29; 1 Cor 11:25). So, if blood represents life and wine represents blood, the vineyard, where wine begins, is the place where life begins. Life grows literally within a fertile woman; further justifying the vineyard symbol representing a fertile woman.

Thus we can interpret Judges 14:5 as saying: "As they approached the [fertile women] of Timnah, suddenly a [powerful killer] came roaring toward him." I understand this as a prophetic warning encoded in the prose: fertile women will form a lethal danger for Samson.

In this case at Timnah, Samson rips the lion apart as if it were a young goat (Jdg 14:6). This lion caused him no damage and, symmetrically, this was true of the Timnite woman. When Samson lost the woman through clandestine manipulations by the Philistines, he didn't seem to care: he was unwounded. Yet this may have persuaded him that he was invulnerable to his attraction for women, which he certainly was not. Indeed, that is a literally fatal assumption on Samson's part, because he is about to meet a lioness in the Valley of Sorek who will claw out his eyes.

And her name is Delilah.

Unraveling Secrets

Samson has unusual strength from God, and God's spirit remains with him as long as he keeps his Nazirite vow (Num 6) that he not drink alcohol or cut his hair, which he wears in seven long braids (Jdg 16:13).

Delilah was hired by the rulers of the Philistines to “entice” (pattî) Samson. Modern analysts reason that pattî means to entice through words,^{8,9} though some English translations render it “seduce” (e.g. ESV), perpetuating the error that Delilah's enticement was sexual. The Philistine Lords' plan was for Delilah to subjugate Samson through persistent nagging or verbal trickery; ‘pattî’ is seen to represent various enticements in the Bible, mainly deceptions (1 Kgs 22:22; Psa 78:36; Hos 2:14). The Hebrew verb can even convey the implication of physical pressure,¹⁰ just as persistent nagging metaphorically does. Interestingly, it's the same enticement that the Philistines compelled Samson's Timnite wife to use against him (Jdg14:15). And this is precisely what happens: Delilah emotionally blackmails Samson by repeatedly complaining that he doesn't really love her if he doesn't tell her what she wants to know. She breaks Samson's resolve with endless pestering:

*With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it.
(Jdg 16:16, NIV)*

The dialogue between Samson and Delilah ruthlessly exposes Samson's susceptibility. Each time he lies about where his strength originates, Delilah openly reveals her treachery by attempting to exploit the alleged weakness he has revealed. This happens three times! Three times a cadre of Philistine would-be captors magically appear in the morning to snare Samson, after Delilah has followed whatever protocol Samson confessed would render him helpless, and three times he fights them off, since he hasn't told Delilah the truth (Jdg 16:6-17). Yet apparently he *doesn't* suspect he has been betrayed?

⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Reading the Women of the Bible,” 2002, p79

⁹ Susan Niditch, “The Old Testament Library: Judges,” 2008, p165-166

¹⁰ Susan Niditch, Op. cit., p170

This creates questions about Samson's character. Is he merely a fool, as some suggest?¹¹ Or does he have such deep-rooted issues with relationships that he simply behaved irrationally?¹² Or is he so desperately addicted to women that he is willfully blind to related danger?¹³ Personally, I think Samson's judgment is badly compromised by his obsession with women. And since Delilah is potentially the most appropriate union he has formed – the others being a Philistine and a prostitute (Jdg14:2 & 16:1) – Samson may be deeply smitten by her.

The three untrue answers Delilah pries out of Samson reveal the power she wields. We can see Samson's latent desire to share everything with her: each answer he gives hints ever more strongly at the truth. The first false answer was that he could be tamed if tied with seven new bowstrings. His real source of strength is the hair he wears in seven braids, so saying "seven bowstrings" is one of the least effective distractions he can make. And when he wakes in the morning to her call of "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" he is indeed tied by seven bowstrings but, because he has lied to Delilah, he's still able to break free.

It gets worse. Samson's second bluff is that he can be subdued by new ropes. Nothing in the world is more visually akin to braided hair than rope (so much so that the Codex Vaticanus uses literally the same word in Judges 16 for 'braid' and 'rope'¹⁴). Samson stresses that the ropes, as the bowstrings, needed to be new – a philosophical match for his hair being uncut. Again, come the morning he finds himself tied with new ropes but again, his vow is unbroken, his strength remains, and he breaks free.

His final misdirection, if it qualifies as a misdirection at all, is that his strength is linked to his seven braids of hair (which it is!) and that he can be physically subjugated by some entanglement of them (either within the beams of the house, or within a loom; translations differ). Once again comes the dawn chorus: "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" and once again Samson breaks free, to Delilah's increasing embarrassment and chagrin. But this latest answer is so close to the truth! Samson is weakening and weakening.

¹¹ Yairah Amit, "The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing," *Bib. Int. Series* 1999, 38, p266-267

¹² Mieke Bal, "Rhetoric of Subjectivity," *Poetics Today* 1984, 5, 2, p356

¹³ Robert Alter, "Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age," 1990

¹⁴ Susan Niditch, *Op. cit.*, p165

Pathetically, we can even see in Samson's language that he knows Delilah is his betrayer; it's revealed in his shift of pronouns, which others report.¹⁵ Samson says:

1. "If *they* bind me with seven fresh bowstrings..."
2. "If *they* bind me with new ropes..."
3. "If *you* weave the seven locks of my head..." (Jdg 16:7,11,13).

He knows who is trying to trap him during the night. But he tells her anyway because, poignantly and ironically, the strongman is utterly powerless already. So he confesses all. He reveals to Delilah that his remarkable physical strength is from God, and remains as long as his vow is unbroken, and his hair uncut. Delilah immediately shaves his head while he sleeps, his vow is broken, and God's favour departs. Come the morning, Samson has no divine power, and is summarily subdued and taken by the Philistines.

His fate is sealed. His unconditional surrender to Delilah costs him his eyes (Jdg 16:21) and later his life. Yet it's his hubris as much as anything that brought him down. He knew full well that whatever weakness he confessed to Delilah she would bring upon him immediately, yet he still told her the truth. Did he believe her love for him would eventually overcome her betrayal? Was he just addicted to taking chances?¹⁶ Or did Samson think, as I suppose, that God's blessing wouldn't leave him even if he did break his vow; that somehow God's love would allow him to breach contract without consequences? Either way he hoped in vain.

And yet, is Delilah really in control here? Is she the Mistress of Manipulation toying with a hopeless, hapless, pawn? Bal has no hesitation in stridently condemning Delilah – a verdict unusually lacking in empathy from a female commentator – describing Delilah's "acceptance of the trade" from the Philistine Lords as "*the* shocking detail."¹⁷ Similarly, Tikva Frymer-Kensky somewhat simplistically dismisses Delilah as an anti-heroine: "Jael defeats an enemy of Israel, and Delilah destroys one of its heroes."¹⁸ For sure Samson is helpless before his Leading Lady but, when we consider Delilah's position, we realize she is at least as much victim as villain, and

¹⁵ Nomi Tamir, "Personal Narrative and Its Linguistic Foundation," *Poetics and the Theory of Literature* 1976, 1, p403-429

¹⁶ Robert Alter, "Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age," 1990, p50

¹⁷ Mieke Bal, "Rhetoric of Subjectivity," *Poetics Today* 1984, 5, 2, p357

¹⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Reading the Women of the Bible," 2002, p84

the fate that befalls Delilah may be unexpected, and it's seldom seen, despite being in the Bible text.

Fatal Fate

Let's consider Delilah's position via a comparison with Queen Vashti, wife of Persian King Artaxerxes, many centuries downstream. Vashti's experiences can educate us about Delilah's because both women existed in similarly patriarchal societies and found themselves in philosophically similar situations.

Queen Vashti refused her royal husband's demand to parade herself before his drunken entourage so they could stare at her beauty (Est 1:10-12). The egotistically fragile (and drunk) king was infuriated by her refusal and convened the royal advisors to determine 'appropriate' sanction for her. One advisor, Memucan, counseled that Vashti's snub could become a precedent for wives across the land to rebuff their husband's random demands, universally weakening the patriarchal privilege they enjoyed. He suggested Vashti should be deposed from being queen, exiled, and replaced. The king was convinced, and Vashti was duly dispatched.

Delilah's situation matches Vashti's in the critical point of her being perceived as a threat to broadly-held male power. The Philistine Lords have promised an enormous sum of money: 1,100 pieces of silver *from each conspirator* to eliminate Samson. The Philistine Lords are setting a precedent that a woman can become enormously wealthy, perhaps self-sufficient for life, if she betrays her politically prominent husband. Whoops. They doubtless realize the problem. Although their plan will succeed, because Delilah can clearly outmaneuver Samson, the precedent puts their own lives at risk! If word gets out that a woman can become financially self-sufficient by selling her politically influential husband down the river, every politically influential male is immediately in jeopardy. If Delilah is seen to succeed, then the Lords of the Philistines will have put their own heads in a noose. Only one solution is possible: Delilah must die. For the patriarchal stranglehold to be maintained, Delilah cannot be permitted to live any more than Vashti could be permitted to remain queen.

This last element falls into place to perfect the Philistine Lords' plan. They will capture Samson, neutralizing the political and military threat he posed. Then they will kill Delilah. This will prevent them from becoming vulnerable as Samson was; the world will see that the woman who tried to gain wealth and independence through betrayal of her man was slaughtered. And

who would mourn Delilah if her story were aired in that context? It's been said from ancient times: "No-one loves a traitor."¹⁹

Now we understand Delilah's position appropriately. She has been contracted to trick Samson and elicit from him the source of his strength. Does she have a choice? By no means. The Philistine Lords have noticed Samson is drawn to her, and his woeful susceptibility to women is his signature Achilles. Delilah is Samson's current obsession; she is given no choice whether or not to participate. She will be killed if she refuses and, if all goes well for them, she will be killed when she succeeds. She never had a chance either way.

Blood Money

We might well ask, even if the above reasoning is logical, is there any scriptural evidence that Delilah was an exploited victim rather than a manipulative siren? There appears to be. First a tiny detail: Delilah repeats the words of the Philistine Lords verbatim. This isn't proof of anything, but is consistent with her being under their control, and so worth noticing.

Lords: *See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. (Jdg 16:5)*

Delilah: *"Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued." (Jdg 16:6)*

The important evidence is Judges 17:1-3. Few may ever have read those verses as part of Delilah's story, because of the chapter break. Chapter breaks are not divine creations. To the contrary, they are manmade hazards, because the reader's understanding of a biblical storyline is often derailed by a poorly positioned chapter break. They were introduced by Stephen Langton in the 13th century (albeit scripture had suffered manmade divisions as far back as 5C Jerome). Langton, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, may have viewed Delilah's story through the male-centered lens of his day and thus, when he saw Samson's death recorded (Jdg 16:31), he concluded that since the male protagonist was now dead the story must be finished.

It isn't. Here is the continuation, and conclusion.

There was a man in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. He said to his mother,

¹⁹ Aesop, Aesop's Fables, ~600 BC, Perry Index 361

“The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and even spoke it in my hearing, that silver is in my possession; I took it; but now I will return it to you.” (Jdg 17:1-2)

The object of conversation is 1,100 pieces of silver, such a rare number in scripture it exists only here and as the payment promised to Delilah (Jdg 16:5) to which it obviously connects. Susan Niditch spots the match, cryptically denoting it “formulaic,” yet astonishingly fails to see anything more.²⁰ An Ephraimite has a debt of 1,100 pieces of silver, and the situation is so urgent that he steals from his own mother to cover it. Later, he gives it back, unspent. What’s going on?

Clearly the 1,100 pieces of silver pertains to the debt owed by the conspirators to Delilah. Could the conspiring group include Israelites as well as Philistines? Quite possibly. The conspirators will include anyone who stands to gain from the defusing of the uncontrollably loose cannon that is Samson, and that will include evil Israelites as much as godless Philistines.²¹ That said, I believe it more likely that Micah is a victim, not an evil conspirator. The Philistines are the occupying force in Israel; I suggest one of their Lords is well aware that Micah’s mother is very rich, and has threatened Micah with menaces to provide the money for the debt.

But here’s the point from Delilah’s perspective, and how it impacts her story. I paraphrase these verses this way:

“Mother, you know the 1,100 silver shekels that went missing from your purse, that made you so angry you swore a curse? Well, I took them, but you can have them back, because I don’t need them anymore.” (Jdg 17:1-3, my paraphrase)

How would a man have a debt of 1,100 silver shekels so pressing that he steals from his mother to cover it, and then suddenly has no debt at all? The simplest solution: because the debt no longer exists, because the creditor no longer exists.

Delilah has been killed.

²⁰ Susan Niditch, Op. cit., p177

²¹ Israel’s well-documented history, both Biblical and extra-Biblical, is peppered with accounts of Israelites conspiring against each other, as all nationalities do. The case of Jesus and Lazarus is the most damning: when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Israelite elders convened an emergency assembly (Jn 11:47) and decided to murder Jesus (Jn 11:53) – and Lazarus! (Jn 12:10-11), simply because they believed their political influence would be weakened if either remained alive to demonstrate Lazarus’ resurrection (Jn 11:48).

It's probably never been taught in Sunday school, and certainly adds a very adult flavour to the otherwise simple tale, but I believe Delilah was as much a victim as Samson, and I believe the Bible says so, if we read carefully enough. Those who promised Delilah she would become a fabulously wealthy woman if she sold her politically dangerous husband to his enemies always knew they could never risk setting that precedent, otherwise they'd be placing their own heads on a chopping block. Delilah could never have been allowed to live, and it wasn't allowed.

If this is true, then to this day this Leading Lady's voice remains essentially unheard, for her common legacy is nothing more than being a conniving seductress. It is generally assumed the climax of the story is the macho heroism of Samson's honorable suicide, where he vanquishes several thousand Philistines by pulling down the roof of an indoor arena upon them all. Delilah's story continues, but remains unseen because a man who felt he had the authority to edit scripture inserted a chapter break, seemingly underscoring the eye-rolling assumption that a tale is concluded when the male hero dies. How perfectly ironic that the final words of a woman's brutal exploitation are even themselves silenced, to rob her even of her own true story.

In reality, the verses following Samson's death crescendo to the truly horrific finale of Delilah's story. They reveal, by subtle implication, our Leading Lady's demise. She may never have been a true heroine, but neither was she the harbinger of undiluted wickedness that many suppose. She was a tragic, trapped victim, who almost certainly died even before Samson did, and in far more sordid and ignominious circumstances, with her throat slit in some dark alley; certainly metaphorically, if not brutally literally.

Perhaps this retelling can restore her voice a little.