

**Entre mitos & conocimiento**  
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# The transformation of biblical Samson or The heroic failure to escape myth

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In this paper I shall discuss some unsuccessful attempts to suppress the mythical dimensions in the story of Samson, first in the original biblical story itself (Judges 13-16), and then in two modern versions that re-write it: the novel *Samson* by Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, written in the late twenties of our century, and the film *Samson and Delilah* by the Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille, produced in the late forties.

Any reading of the biblical Samson story easily reveals two conflicting facts. First, that Samson has some traits that make him superior to any ordinary human being. A very strong and resourceful person could perhaps knock down thirty people and steal their garments; powerful and skillful man may fight a sick old lion. But who could single-handedly slay a thousand warriors, using only the jawbone of an ass, or carry the city-gates of Gaza or bring down a huge temple in which more than three thousand people were gathered? Such deeds seem fit for a mythical figure, endowed with super-human forces, perhaps a half-human half-godly creature.

The second fact, equally conspicuous, is that the Bible makes every effort to conceal and suppress these mythical dimensions of the story and the figure. Anything that "smells" of super-human strength, of magical power, is subjected to a strict religious interpretation. Let us consider, for example, Samson's origins: the first thought that comes to mind is that Samson is the son of the sun god (coupling with Samson's mother in the form of a heavenly visit). The reason for making that connection is almost

unavoidable for anybody who speaks Hebrew (as some of the early rabbis observed in their interpretations). Sun in Hebrew is *shemesh* and Samson's name in Hebrew is *Shimshon*. The Bible tries to counter such thoughts by including a long annunciation scene (Judges 13) in which Samson's birth is foretold by an angel. Does the pious biblical version block the mythical association? Not necessarily, and in fact these attempts to suppress the mythical dimensions seem only to enhance speculation about the real source of Samson as a character and of the Samson story.

The mythical aspects of the story are evident despite the Bible's (heroic) attempts to suppress them. We're not dealing with a single, isolated detail that can be associated with a myth, but with a large and interconnected series of elements. Samson's association with the sun or sun-god is based not only on phonological or etymological reasons—the resemblance in the sound of their names—but also on details of Samson's appearance: his locks of hair resemble the sun's rays. What is even more important, the connection is based also on certain events in the plot: Samson's major enemy in the story, the one who brings him down, is the woman he loves, Delilah. And, again, for anyone who knows Hebrew it is significant that within Delilah's name one can easily find the word 'night': *lylah*. Thus, the battle between the Hebrew Samson and the Philistine Delilah can be portrayed as another variation on the eternal, mythical battle between the forces of light, represented by the son of the sun, and the forces of darkness and night, represented by a wicked woman.

And what is the source of Samson's strength? Is it located in his locks and thus are we in a world of magic, in which a hero's strength or weakness can be found in potions or parts of his body (Achilles' heel comes naturally to mind in this context)? Again, the Bible goes out of its way to erase such heretical thoughts and emphasizes that Samson's strength stems from his vow to God as a Nazarite. When Samson breaks his religious vows, his strength is taken from him, and after he repents and prays to God, he gets it back. Note, moreover, that we are told, before the dramatic culmination of the story in the temple of Dagon

where Samson prays to God, that his hair has grown back again: "Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven" (Judges 16:22). Thus, as with the idea about Samson being a demi-god, so with the question concerning the source of his strength, it seems that the Bible's attempts to suppress the mythical and magical dimensions do not succeed in blocking such ideas and perhaps even only enhance them.

Thus, one can detect in the biblical text many tensions between, on the one hand, the mythical dimensions and sources of the Samson stories,<sup>1</sup> and, on the other, the attempts to suppress these sources and to replace them with the new monotheistic belief.

When we approach modern re-writings of the biblical Samson, we may naturally expect that such mythical dimensions will have vanished. After all, it is commonly assumed that modern times have long abandoned mythical ways of thinking. In a way, this is true. It is even more true in the sense that the two works that I am going on to discuss portray and re-create Samson as a more plausible and more realistic figure. Still, despite the general *Zeitgeist* as well as the more realistic picture of Samson that we get in Jabotinsky's novel *Samson*<sup>2</sup> and DeMille's film, *Samson and Delilah*, some mythical dimensions still seem to lurk in unexpected corners of the story and to resist obliteration.

Jabotinsky's novel *Samson* was written originally in Russian in the late twenties and was quickly translated into Hebrew, English and German. The novel achieved much success, especially in the Hebrew translation, among Jewish readers in Palestine, notably contemporary right-wing youth. For these young people, Samson, as portrayed in the novel, became a model-hero.<sup>3</sup>

As historians of Zionism tell us, Jabotinsky was the leader of the right wing element of the movement, the founder of the Zionist Revisionist party and its youth movement, Beitar. In addition to his political and ideological activities, Jabotinsky was also a very talented writer and a gifted translator of poetry into Hebrew (his version of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" is still considered a translator's masterpiece). In some of his fiction he tried to express his ideological attitudes, and *Samson* is

perhaps his most political piece.

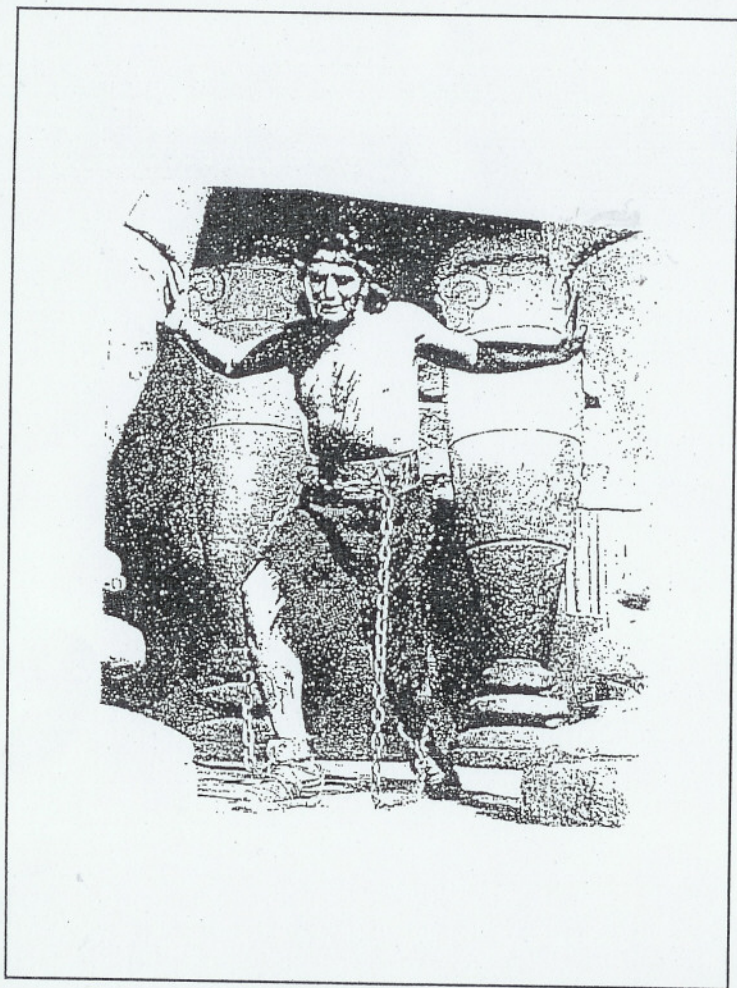
Apart from the political ramifications of the novel, perhaps the most striking thing about it is the radically secular perspective on the story. Jabotinsky actually gave every event a realistic, materialistic explanation, based on social, ethnic, psychological and economic factors. Thus, Samson's birth is described as the result of adultery—the man who came to see Samson's mother in the field (as described in Judges 13) was no angel of God, but the mother's lover, and Samson's real father. Samson's strength was not super-human; he was simply an extremely resourceful warrior. And some of the so-called facts that come to us from the Bible about his deeds are in fact legendary embellishments or urban folktales. A small but representative example: The foxes with fiery tails that Samson loosed into the Philistines' crops were in fact a bunch of young fighters, led by him during some guerilla war against the Philistines and helping him keep control over his fellow Israelites. Another representative example: after Samson's locks were shaved by Delilah, he lost his might and stamina not because of any super-human factors but because he was ridiculed by the Philistines for being a bald-head. This semi-mythical event is thus explained on very simple psychological grounds.

At face value, it would seem that Jabotinsky's Samson not only lost his locks but also all his mythical dimensions, leaving us with a straightforward "realistic" tale. To a certain degree that may be the case, but history has its ironic twists. Hayim Nachman Bialik, the prominent Hebrew poet of the turn of this century, made an interesting comment on the novel. He said that Jabotinsky successfully created not only a credible literary figure, but also a myth (see Bistrizky). Why did Bialik make such a statement, when he knew, as any reader knows, that Jabotinsky's Samson has no super-human forces and that most of the events in the story are given realistic explanations? To understand Bialik's comment we should take "myth" and "mythical" in a wider, looser sense than the one that refers to Greco-Roman or other ancient cultures. In this wider sense, a figure would gain mythical dimensions if he or she

becomes "larger than life"; uprooted from the concrete historical circumstances in which he or she lived; and turns into a symbol capable of explaining history. In the traditional sense of the term 'myth' we have, in addition to the above meanings, also the assumption that the myth (the story) and the mythical way of thinking are detached from and even contrasted to logical ways of thinking and involve some supernatural forces or agents.

In the broad, loose, modern sense of the term that I'm using here, we may talk of the mythical dimensions that certain historical figures have acquired. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, for instance, would come to mind in modern, almost contemporary American history. John Fitzgerald Kennedy has gained a mythical aura such as no other modern American president can lay claim to. It is very difficult, for instance, to imagine someone like Bill Clinton sprouting such aura, despite the fact that *prima facie*, these two have the same political and ideological agenda. It takes something beyond specific political attitudes to win the mythical aura. In a similar sense we can also talk of certain literary characters who have acquired the symbolic-mythical dimension (in the broad sense)—like Don Quixote or even Kafka's Joseph K. In this context, I think one can understand, and accept Bialik's comment. Jabotinsky's Samson indeed became, at least among Jewish readers of the thirties and forties, especially in Palestine, a hero-model, a symbol, a myth to be emulated in the political and the social arena.

According to Bialik, the character took on mythical dimensions because he represented a coherent, if complex, model for acting in history and for explaining history. Jabotinsky thought that the most important factors determining a nation's fate are its ability to gather its vital forces, organize them and translate them into military might and political strength under the leadership of one ruler. If this sounds a bit repellent to our ears, reminding us of some fascist values, this is no accident. It seems that during the twenties Jabotinsky was indeed impressed by the growing power of fascist Italy. However, we should modify our criticism, because at that time the horrors of the fascist regime were not yet known or fully



developed. Besides, Jabotinsky was not satisfied with military strength and political unity. He also had strong beliefs about the importance of cultural life based on liberal values. Thus, when Samson announces his solemn will to the people of Israel before the dramatic end of his story, he enumerates three vital things that his people should learn:

Tell them three things in my name, and not two: they must get iron [i.e., weapons - D.F.]; they must choose a king; and they must learn to laugh. (Jabotinsky, p. 331).

The first two caught the attention of Jabotinsky's right-wing followers, but the third, mitigating factor that puts an emphasis on culture, laughter and irony seemed less important to them.

Thanks to memorable formulations, like the one in his testament, Jabotinsky's Samson became a model hero, and gained the mythical dimension that Bialik talks about. An indirect echo of the impact that the novel and Samson's impressive figure had on the Jewish community in Palestine from the thirties onward can be seen in *My Michael*, the well-known novel by Amos Oz, the widely translated and highly regarded contemporary Israeli novelist. The scene takes place in 1956, during the Sinai war (perhaps better known in the West as the Suez Canal operation). Chana Gonen, the heroine of the novel, is visited by two elderly right-wing neighbors who try to cheer her up when her husband, Michael, is called up to his reserve army unit. One of them, Mr. Kadishman, delivers this patriotic speech:

Israel is no longer "as scattered sheep"; we are no longer a ewe among seventy wolves, or a lamb being led to the slaughter. We have had enough. "Among wolves, be a wolf." It has all happened as Jabotinsky foretold in his prophetic novel, *Prelude to Delilah*. Have you read Jabotinsky's *Prelude to Delilah*, Mrs. Gonen? It is well worth reading. And especially now that our army is pursuing the routed forces of Pharaoh and the sea is not divided for the fleeing Egyptians. (Oz, p. 168)

For these two elderly Revisionists, Jabotinsky's Samson functioned not as a simple literary character, but as a model hero, a symbol, an explanatory principle that may guide one's footsteps in history—in other

words, as a modern myth.

Now let us turn to another modern work of art that has re-created the Samson story, and see where and how one can find mythical dimensions in it: DeMille's *Samson and Delilah*. As with Jabotinsky's novel, so with DeMille's film, a superficial look will not reveal any mythical dimension. It is instructive to note that DeMille partly based his screenplay on Jabotinsky's novel (probably one of the researchers came across the English translation). He took from Jabotinsky, for instance, the brilliant idea of making Delilah the younger and jealous sister of Samson's first love, the Timnath woman. But unlike Jabotinsky, DeMille was not particularly interested in politics, let alone the military and political build-up of modern Jews. In fact, the film is focused on the dramatic love story between Samson and Delilah, which was one of the reasons that made it a great box office success when it came out in 1949.

In order to make the relationship between Samson and Delilah more moving and melodramatic, DeMille did not hesitate to alter certain details of the biblical story (as well as of Jabotinsky's novel) —but without tampering with the basic plot. First, he followed Jabotinsky by making Delilah the younger sister of the first Philistine woman, Semadar, thus adding sibling rivalry over the attractive Hebrew strong man. Secondly, he adds further romantic interest to the story: in addition to Semadar, a young and virtuous Hebrew young woman also fights for Samson's love against Delilah. We also have a rival to Samson in the contest for Delilah herself —the Philistine leader, Saran of Gaza. Delilah is his concubine, but finally he loses her to Samson: Delilah's body may belong to him for some time, but her heart always belongs to Samson.

But the most significant change that DeMille made to the biblical story (and here he was also very different from Jabotinsky) was to turn Delilah into a penitent. Thanks to her true repentance, Samson forgives her and towards the end they become a loving couple, notably during the memorable and tragic ending, where Delilah helps Samson execute his suicidal plan. It is Delilah who leads the blinded Samson to the pillars upon which the temple rests, and who decides to stay with him in the

shattered temple, knowing that death will come to her.

Thus, if DeMille made the Samson story into a semi-sweet melodrama of love, didn't he kill every mythical dimension? I would like to argue that not necessarily. There are two aspects which still show how the Samson story gained a mythical dimension in the cinematic re-creation. First, DeMille attached a prologue to the story. Pictures of the earth, idols and the boots of conquering legions are accompanied by the following text (in voice over):

Before the dawn of history, ever since the first man discovered his soul, he has struggled against the forces that sought to enslave him. He saw the awful power of nature raid against him: the evil eye of the lightening, the terrifying voice of the thunder, the shrinking wind filled darkness —enslaving his mind in shackles of fear. Fear breeds superstition, blinding his reason. He was ridden by a host of devil-gods; human dignity perished on the altar of idolatry. And tyranny rules, grinding the human spirit beneath the conqueror's heels. But deep in man's heart still burns the unquenchable will for freedom. When this divine spark flames in the soul of some mortal, whether priest of soldier, artist or patriot, lover or statesman, his deeds have changed the course of human events and his name survives the ages. In the village of Zorea in the land of Dan, one thousand years before the birth of Christ lived such a man. In him the elements had fused greatness and weakness, strength and folly. But with these was a bold dream: liberty for his nation. The man's name was Samson. For forty years the Philistines had held his people in Bondage. (DeMille)

In this prologue we get a brief account of human history. According to this narrative, there is a constant battle between the forces of evil and the forces of good. DeMille packs together superstition, idolatry and tyranny on the one hand, and human dignity, belief in one God and freedom and democracy on the other. Needless to say, this brief course in human history had contemporary political resonance. It was only composed four years after the end of World War 2 and the beginning of the Cold War, and there is no doubt that DeMille sees a line running from the ancient Hebrews to their Christian heirs and from there to modern democracies, notably the United States of America. By the same token he identifies a line connecting ancient tyrants with the Soviet Union.

In addition to the specific political stands embodied in this prologue, from my perspective the important point is that DeMille didn't want us to forget the mythical dimensions of the story. True, he focused on the love of Samson and Delilah, but he also wanted us to watch that story as an emblem of the eternal battle between good and evil.

There is yet another mythical dimension that DeMille did not want us to miss, while he was embellishing a melodramatic love story: strange dimension that can be called mythico-religious. During the concluding scene, where Samson stands between the two pillars of Dagon's temple, just before he topples it down on everybody, DeMille undoubtedly associates the figure of Samson —with its position, its wounds, its suffering expression— with the figure of Christ on the Cross (see the illustration). Needless to say, there is a very rich tradition in literature and art that portrays Samson as a precursor of Christ (especially in medieval art),<sup>4</sup> and in a way DeMille joins this tradition. Thus the figure of Samson is elevated from the "earthly" love story to more heavenly plains. The corporeal, earthly personage acquires spiritual and mythical qualities.

To conclude: if a literary figure launched its career as a hero with mythical dimensions, as Samson did, it will probably be very difficult, almost impossible, for it to shed these dimensions in future re-writings, re-creatings and transformations. It would take great effort to erase these mythical dimensions —perhaps a heroic effort befitting someone like Samson himself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These sources in ancient cultures are discussed at length in S.A. Palmer, *Samson's Saga and its Place in Comparative Religion*. See also Zakovitz, especially pp. 236-239.

<sup>2</sup> The same English translation of the novel was published also under the titles of *Prelude to Delilah* and *Judge and Fool*.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss this influence in my article (1997) and in the second chapter of my forthcoming book.

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of this tradition, see Krouse, and the fourth chapter of my forthcoming book.

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