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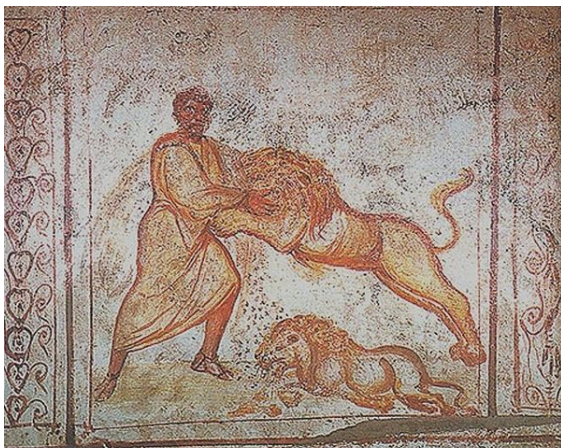
Samson

This article is about the biblical figure. For other uses, see [Samson \(disambiguation\)](#).

Samson (/ˈsæmsən/; Hebrew: שִׁמְשׁוֹן, Modern



"Samson's Fight with the Lion" by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1525.



Samson and the Lion Wall painting, Via Latina Catacomb, Rome, circa 350-400 A.D.

Samson and Lions, Rome 350-400 A.D.

Shimshon Tiberian *Šimšôn*, meaning “man of the sun”),^[1] **Shamshoun** (Arabic: شمشون *Shamshūn/Šamsšūn*), or **Sampson** (Greek: Σαμψών), is one of the last of the judges of the ancient Israelites mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Book of Judges chapters 13 to 16).

According to the biblical account, Samson was given supernatural strength by God in order to combat his enemies and perform heroic feats^[2] such as killing a lion, slaying an entire army with only the jawbone of an ass, and destroying a [pagan temple](#). Samson had two vulnerabilities, however: his attraction to untrustworthy women and his hair, without which he was powerless. These vulnerabilities ultimately proved fatal for him.

Samson is believed by Jews and Christians to have been buried in Tel Tzora in Israel overlooking the Sorek valley. There reside two large gravestones of Samson and his father Manoah. Nearby stands Manoah's altar (Judges 13:19–24).^[3] It is located between the cities of Zorah and Eshtaol.

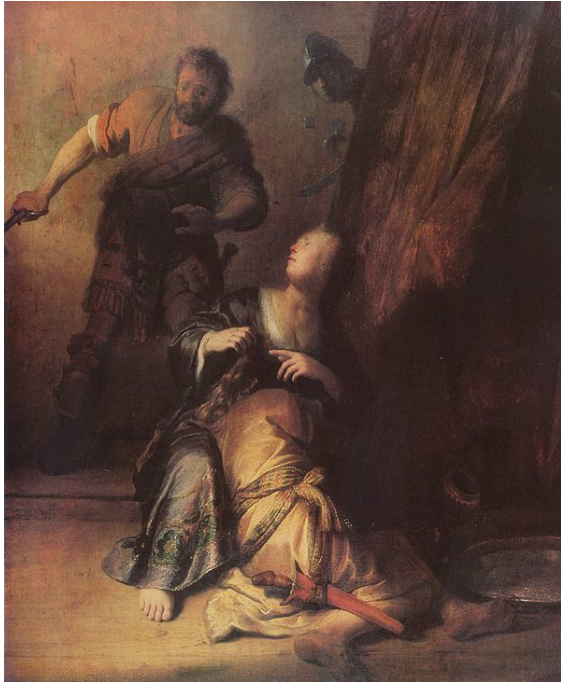
1 Biblical narrative

Main article: [Nazirite](#)

Samson's activity takes place during a time when God was punishing the Israelites, by giving them “into the hand of the Philistines”.^[4] The Angel of the Lord appears to Manoah, an Israelite from the tribe of Dan, in the city of Zorah, and to his wife, who had been unable to conceive.^{[5][6]} The Angel of the Lord proclaims that the couple will soon have a son who will begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.^[7] The wife believed the Angel of the Lord, but her husband was not present, at first, and wanted the heavenly messenger to return, asking that he himself could also receive instruction about the child who was going to be born.

Requirements were set up by the Angel of the Lord that Manoah's wife (as well as the child) were to abstain from all alcoholic beverages, and her promised child was not to shave or cut his hair. He was to be a "Nazirite" from birth. In ancient Israel, those wanting to be especially dedicated to God for a while could take a nazirite vow, which included things like the aforementioned as well as other stipulations.^{[5][6][7]} After the Angel of the Lord returned, Manoah soon prepared a sacrifice, but the Angel of the Lord would only allow it to be for God, touching his staff to it, miraculously engulfing it in flames. The An-

gel of the Lord then ascended up into the sky in the fire, and in so doing revealed that he was not simply an angel but was God in angelic form. This was such dramatic evidence as to the nature of the Messenger, that Manoah feared for his life, as it had been said that no one can live after seeing God; however, his wife soon convinced him that if God planned to slay them, he would never have revealed such things to them to begin with. In due time the son, Samson, is born; he is reared according to these provisions.^{[6][7]}



Rembrandt's painting of Samson and Delilah.

When he becomes a young adult, Samson leaves the hills of his people to see the cities of the Philistines. While there, Samson falls in love with a Philistine woman from Timnah whom he decides to marry, overcoming the objections of his parents who do not know that “it is of the Lord”.^{[6][7][8]} The intended marriage is actually part of God’s plan to strike at the Philistines.^[7] On the way to ask for the woman’s hand in marriage, Samson is attacked by a lion and simply grabs it and rips it apart, as the spirit of God moves upon him, divinely empowering him. This so profoundly affects Samson that he just keeps it to himself as a secret.^{[7][9]} He continues on to the Philistine’s house, winning her hand in marriage. On his way to the wedding, Samson notices that bees have nested in the carcass of the lion and have made honey.^{[7][9]} He eats a handful of the honey and gives some to his parents.^[7] At the wedding-feast, Samson proposes that he tell a riddle to his thirty groomsmen (all Philistines); if they can solve it, he will give them thirty pieces of fine linen and garments, but if they cannot solve it; they will give him thirty pieces of fine linen and garments.^{[6][7]} The riddle (“Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet”) is a veiled account of his second en-

counter with the lion (at which only he was present).^{[7][9]} The Philistines are infuriated by the riddle.^[7] The thirty groomsmen tell Samson’s new wife that they will burn her and her father’s household if she does not discover the answer to the riddle and tell it to them.^{[7][9]} At the urgent and tearful imploring of his bride, Samson tells her the solution, and she tells it to the thirty groomsmen.^{[6][7]}



Samson in the Treadmill, by Carl Heinrich Bloch.

Before sunset on the seventh day they said to him,

“What is sweeter than honey?
and what is stronger than a lion?”

Samson said to them,

“If you had not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have solved my riddle.”^{[8][10]}

He flies into a rage and kills thirty Philistines of Ashkelon for their garments, which he gives his thirty groomsmen.^{[6][9][10]} Still in a rage, he returns to her father’s house and finds out that his bride has been given to another man as wife.^{[6][9][10]} Her father refuses to allow him to see her and wishes to give Samson the younger sister.^{[6][10]} Samson attaches torches to the tails of three hundred foxes, leaving the panicked beasts to run through the fields of the Philistines, burning all in their wake.^{[6][9][10]} The Philistines find out why Samson burned their crops and they burn Samson’s wife and father-in-law to death.^{[6][10][11]} In revenge, Samson



Delilah cuts Samson's hair, by Master E. S., 1460/1465.

slaughters many more Philistines, saying, "I have done to them what they did to me."^{[6][10]}

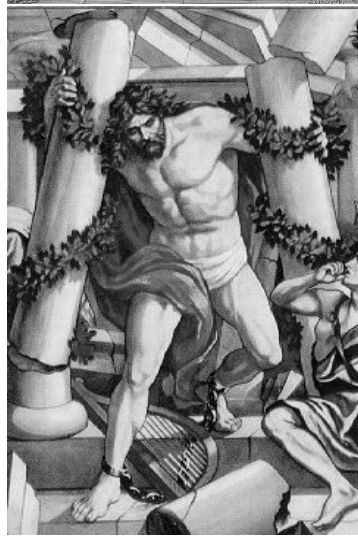
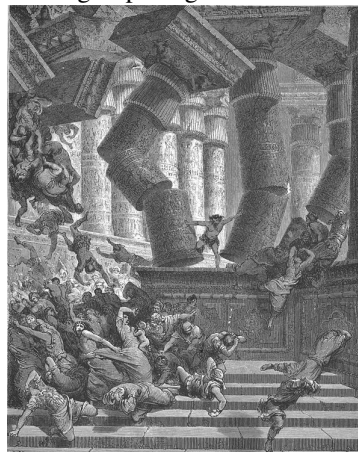
Samson then takes refuge in a cave in the rock of Etam.^{[6][10][12]} An army of Philistines goes up and demands that 3000 men of Judah deliver them Samson.^{[6][12]} With Samson's consent, they tie him with two new ropes and are about to hand him over to the Philistines when he breaks free of the ropes.^{[11][12]} Using the jawbone of a donkey he slays 1,000 Philistines.^{[11][12][13]} At the conclusion of *Judges* 15 it is said that Samson had "judged" Israel for twenty years.^[12]

Later, Samson goes to Gaza, where he stays at a harlot's house.^{[10][14]} His enemies wait at the gate of the city to ambush him, but he rips the gate up and carries it to "the hill that is in front of Hebron".^{[10][14]}

He then falls in love with a woman, Delilah, at the Brook of Sorek.^{[10][11][14][15]} The Philistines approach Delilah and induce her (with 11,000 gold and silver coins) to try to find the secret of Samson's strength so they can get rid of it and capture their enemy.^{[10][14]} Samson, not wanting to reveal the secret, teases her, telling her that he will lose his strength should he be bound with fresh bowstrings.^{[10][14]} She does so while he sleeps, but when he wakes up he snaps the strings.^{[10][14]} She persists, and he tells her he can be bound with new ropes. She ties him up with new ropes while he sleeps, and he snaps them, too.^{[10][14]} She asks again, and he says he can be bound if his locks are woven together.^{[10][14]} She weaves

them together, but he undoes them when he wakes.^{[10][14]} Eventually after much nagging from Samson's third wife, Samson tells Delilah that he will lose his strength with the loss of his hair.^{[10][11][14][15]} Delilah calls for a servant to shave Samson's seven locks.^{[10][14][15]} Since that breaks the Nazirite oath, God leaves him, and Samson is captured by the Philistines,^{[10][13][14]} who blind him by punching out his eyes. After being blinded, Samson is brought to Gaza, imprisoned, and put to work grinding grain and making milk by turning a large millstone.^[14]

Pushing or pulling?



According to the biblical narrative, Samson died when he grasped two pillars of the Temple of Dagon, and "bowed himself with all his might" (Judges 16:30, KJV). This has been variously interpreted as Samson pushing the pillars apart (*top*) or pulling them together (*bottom*).

1.1 Death

One day, the Philistine leaders assembled in a temple for a religious sacrifice to Dagon, one of their most important deities, for having delivered Samson into their hands.^{[14][16]} They summon Samson so that people can gather on the roof to watch.^{[14][15][16]} Once inside the temple, Samson, his hair having grown long again, asks

the servant who is leading him to the temple's central pillars if he may lean against them (referring to the pillars).^{[11][14][16]} In Judges 16:

28 Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." 29 Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and braced himself against them, the one with his right hand and the other with his left. 30 And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he bent with all his might so that the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life.

—Judges 16:28–30

After his death, Samson's family recovers his body from the rubble and buries him near the tomb of his father Manoah.^[16] A tomb structure in Tel Tzora which some attribute to Samson and his father stands in the former Arab-Palestinian village Sar'a, on the top of the mountain now called Tel Tzor'a.^[17] One 2013 source, however, identifies a historical structure known as Maqam Neby or Sheikh Samat as the tomb of Samson and asserts that it has not existed for the past half century.^[18] The Bible does not mention the fate of Delilah.^[15]

2 Rabbinic literature

Main article: [Samson in rabbinic literature](#)

Rabbinical literature identifies Samson with Bedan;^[6] Bedan was a Judge mentioned by Samuel in his farewell address (1 Samuel 12:11) among the Judges that delivered Israel from their enemies.^[19] However, the name "Bedan" is not found in the Book of Judges.^[19] The name "Samson" is derived from the Hebrew word "shemesh", which means the sun, so that Samson bore the name of God, who is called "a sun and shield" in Psalms 84:11; and as God protected Israel, so did Samson watch over it in his generation, judging the people even as did God.^[6] Samson's strength was divinely derived (Talmud, Tractate So-tah 10a).^{[6][20]}

Jewish legend records that Samson's shoulders were sixty cubits broad.^[6] (Although many talmudic commentaries explain that this is not to be taken literally, for a person that size could not live normally in society. Rather it means he had the ability to carry a burden 60 cubits wide (approximately 30 meters) on his shoulders).^[21] He was lame in both feet,^[22] but when the spirit of God came upon him he could step with one stride from Zorah to

Eshtaol, while the hairs of his head arose and clashed against one another so that they could be heard for a like distance.^{[6][23]} Samson was said to be so strong that he could uplift two mountains and rub them together like two clods of earth,^[24] yet his superhuman strength, like Goliath's, brought woe upon its possessor.^{[6][25]}

In licentiousness he is compared with Amnon and Zimri, both of whom were punished for their sins.^{[6][26]} Samson's eyes were put out because he had "followed them" too often.^{[6][27]} It is said that in the twenty years during which Samson judged Israel he never required the least service from an Israelite,^[28] and he piously refrained from taking the name of God in vain.^[6] Therefore, as soon as he told Delilah that he was a Nazarite of God she immediately knew that he had spoken the truth.^{[6][27]} When he pulled down the temple of Dagon and killed himself and the Philistines the structure fell backward, so that he was not crushed, his family being thus enabled to find his body and to bury it in the tomb of his father.^{[6][29]}

In the Talmudic period, some seemed to have denied that Samson was a historic figure and was regarded by such individuals as a purely mythological personage. This was viewed as heretical by the rabbis of the Talmud, and they attempted to refute this. They named Hazeleponi as his mother in Numbers Rabbah Naso 10 and in Bava Batra 91a and stated that he had a sister named "Nishyan" or "Nashyan".^[6]

3 Interpretations



The Blinded Samson, by Lovis Corinth, 1912.

Academics have interpreted Samson as a demigod (such



Russian drinking bowl depicting Samson.

as Hercules or Enkidu) enfolded into Jewish religious lore, or as an archetypal folklore hero, among others. These views sometimes interpreted him as a solar deity, popularized by “solar hero” theorists and biblical scholars alike.^{[30][31][32]} The name Delilah may also involve a wordplay with the Hebrew word for night, 'layla', which “consumes” the day.^[33] Samson bears many similar traits to the Greek Herakles (and the Roman Hercules adaptation), inspired himself partially from the mesopotamian Enkidu tale: Herakles and Samson both battled a Lion bare handed (Lion of Nemea feat), Herakles and Samson both had a favorite primitive blunt weapon (a club for the first, an ass’s jaw for the latter), and they were both betrayed by a woman which led them to their ultimate fate (Herakles by Dejanira, while Samson by Delilah). Both heroes, champion of their respective people, die by their own hand: Herakles ends his life on a pyre while Samson makes the Philistine temple collapse upon himself and his enemies.^{[34][35]}

These views are disputed by traditional and conservative biblical scholars who consider Samson to be a literal historical figure and thus reject any connections to mythological heroes.^[36] That Samson was a “solar hero” has been described as “an artificial ingenuity”.^[37] Some biblical scholars suggest that Samson’s home tribe of Dan might have been related to the Philistines themselves. “Dan” might be another name for the tribe of Sea Peoples otherwise known as the Denyen, Danuna, or Danaans. If so, then Samson’s origin might be entirely Aegean.^[38] These speculations are in stark contrast to the historical depictions expressed in the Bible and are therefore mutually exclusive.

Joan Comay, co-author of *Who’s Who in the Bible: The Old Testament and the Apocrypha, The New Testament,*

believes that the biblical story of Samson is so specific concerning time and place that Samson was undoubtedly a real person who pitted his great strength against the oppressors of Israel.^[39] In contrast, James King West finds that the hostilities between the Philistines and Hebrews appear to be of a “purely personal and local sort”. He also finds that Samson stories have, in contrast to much of *Judges*, an “almost total lack of a religious or moral tone”.^[40]

Dr. Zvi Lederman, co-director of the Tel Aviv University Beth Shemesh dig which discovered the seal discussed below, believes that Beth Shemesh, a Canaanite village, was a cultural meeting point on the border of Israelite, Canaanite and Philistine areas and calls the stories “border sagas”, saying that Samson could cross boundaries, seeking a Philistine wife but also fighting and killing Philistines. He is quoted as saying “When you cross the border, you have to fight the enemy and you encounter dangerous animals. You meet bad things. These are stories of contact and conflict, of a border that is more cultural than political.”^[41]

4 Archaeology

In August 2012, archaeologists from Tel Aviv University announced the discovery of a circular stone seal, approximately 15 millimetres in diameter, and apparently depicting a lion and a man. The seal was found on the floor of a house at Beth Shemesh and is dated to the 12th century BCE. Professor Shlomo Bunimovitz, a co-director of the dig, was reported as saying that the artifact helps “anchor the story [of Samson] in an archaeological setting.”^[42] According to Haaretz, “excavation directors Prof. Shlomo Bunimovitz and Dr. Zvi Lederman of Tel Aviv University say they do not suggest that the human figure on the seal is the biblical Samson. Rather, the geographical proximity to the area where Samson lived, and the time period of the seal, show that a story was being told at the time of a hero who fought a lion, and that the story eventually found its way into the biblical text and onto the seal.”^[43]

5 Cultural influence

Main article: *Samson in popular culture*

As an important biblical character, Samson has been referenced in popular culture and depicted in a vast array of films, artwork and popular literature.

Samson parades of a large Samson-like figure, which are made of wood or aluminum, are held annually in different villages in Lungau, Salzburg and two villages in the north-west Styria (Austria).^[44] Samson is one of the giant figures at the “Ducasse” festivities, which take place at Ath, Belgium.^[45]



Samson parade Mauterndorf, Austria.



Statue of Samson and the lion in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

A regional version of Samson (spelled *Sanson*) plays a major role in many accounts of Basque mythology, where he is represented as a mighty giant capable of hurling heavy stones, often providing an explanation for the origin of mountains and megalithic monuments. In some places this role is played by a development of the character Roland (*Errolan*).

6 See also

- Gilgamesh
- Saint-Samson

- Samson Option
- Samson Unit
- Shamash
- Strength (Tarot card)

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8 External links

- 'Samson' by Solomon Solomon.
- *Samsonfigur*

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