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## Samson's Honey

*Mark Mirsky*

**S**amson's hair—that is a riddle as sure as the honey caught between a lion's jaws is sign and cipher. What left the hero powerless in bed—his shorn off locks? Can you, superstitious Israel, take that fable between your teeth and lick up meaning from it?

Why pick Samson as deliverer of the Chosen People—a man tainted with honey, his mouth smeared with it? His mighty arm? The strength of a giant makes a tall tale, a good one, but it's not my story.

Go back to the angel.

He is the mystery surging up in the lines of *Judges*. The truth is lodged in the cloying sweetness of an image that through my nostrils unstrings imagination.

“And he appeared, an angel of the Holy One, to the woman...” Where did he appear? We learn several verses down, when he comes “yet again” that she, the bride, is “sitting in a field.” And she reveals to her husband that this “man of the Holy One” has “the appearance of an angel.” She describes him in a phrase that can mean “very terrible” or “awesome.”

This overwhelming form of another world tells her, “Not to eat a single unclean thing.”

Why must he tell her this? The Biblical critic glosses: “*The story is set at a time before the eating of ritually tainted food was prohibited to lay Israelites. At first only priests needed to observe this constraint. Samson's mother must observe the regimen of one consummated to divine service.*”

Has not Israel been commanded to be a nation of priests? Must it be *such* a long time before they *all* become one holy body? We do know that this woman ate unclean things. Later she will be fed them by her own son, despite her consecration. Samson's mother is warned as well not to drink wine or strong liquor.

“Did he find you like this, half dressed, or undressed in the field?” I hear Manoach about to inquire, but his wife has more to say. “I can’t drink—no more hard liquor, not even wine.” Is there contempt in her eye for Manoach? He can still take up his skin or jug. The man who looks like an angel said nothing about the husband refraining.

That hair—I can’t get it out of my eyes. “*What have you done to her?*”

Shall I admit it? I have exchanged places with her. Like King Saul who danced and ran naked with a band of prophets who came down from the hill, tearing off their clothes in ecstasy. I have given her madness, the holiness of prophecy, because I wish to bring the Angel, the Presence, down. I want to confound the Nazirite with his wild hair, the prophet unbound who will tether the heavens to the earth and draw them together. Honey, wine, sweetness beyond all measure of the flesh, the spirit burns as a wind of perfumes.

Let Manoach’s wife run naked in long tresses, bound up in union with an angel. Hair will be Samson’s downfall. Why? “*Are you suggesting that...Samson gets a haircut, fails in bed, and Delilah attributes the failure to the haircut? This is quite a displacement.*” No, I won’t go so far. Still Samson’s hair works magic in this story—he understands that, and in the eyes of his wife his virility will be tied to it—his strength. It is a story, as the commentator explains, of puns, double meanings. Hair—wild, untrammelled, uncut—is the image of the Holy One’s presence, and the sexual and spiritual are bound in one bundle destined for the altar.

Manoach understands none of this, but he wants to meet the stranger. He begins to cry, to entreat, to pray. After all, the woman has told him she is pregnant. She is going to have a baby, isn’t that what she means? Shouldn’t he at least meet the man who is responsible? “And he says, ‘Please O My Lord, the man of the Holy One, you sent to us? Send him, please...again...to us...and teach us what we should do with the boy who will be born.’” If he tells the neighbors they will laugh themselves silly—a child to his barren wife promised by a “terrible” or “awesome” man she met in a field. They might stone her. Oh yes, there are stories about patriarchs whose children were announced, but they were safely confined in tents, not lying about in the fields. And these are stories! You don’t live life by stories. It’s best, in fact, if she tells no one about this stranger who has no name and doesn’t come from anywhere he wants to talk about. For she is still lying in

the field, eating what they can catch? The stranger enumerates all his previous injunctions against these transgressions and repeats again, “Watch it!” It’s not fair to Manoach, my suspicions. He is probably just as pious as his wife is holy, but the angel’s tone is unmistakable, peremptory.

Manoach is lonely. He has been sitting in the house alone. A stranger who can make his wife skip and run? This may be a good thing, topsy turvy, but Manoach is nothing if not hospitable. He has the manners of our patriarch, Abraham. Why not have a feast? “Stay a while,” he begs the man. “We’ll kill a goat for you.”

“I can stay a while,” the stranger says, “but I can’t eat your bread.”

For a moment Manoach is startled. He’s about to get angry, when the man adds, “If you want to offer the roasted goat up to the Holy One, go ahead!” And the text informs us, “Manoach doesn’t know that this one is an angel of the Holy One.”

A man comes twice to your wife, in the open field, where a woman is liable to sexual assault, and she comes back from her meeting and tells you she is going to bear a son. She has to stop drinking wine, hard stuff, and all the *traife* she isn’t usually picky about, snake, rabbit, maybe even pig. That’s not what makes an impression though—it’s that she is sure she is going to be pregnant. And you have no idea that this man is an angel. On the contrary, you are ready to roast a goat, and get drunk with him—and you want to know if there is a child coming, as your wife assures you. Just what are you supposed to do, what’s the “law” and what is going to become of this, hypothetical, boy?

Manoach makes another stab at clarity. “What’s your name?”

“It’s a secret,” the stranger says.

This could be funny, if the man didn’t have something to do with his wife’s pregnancy.

“Okay,” Manoach must hum, “We’ll try it your way.” For a few moments later he is leading out one of his goats, piling up wood on one of the stones in the field, and slitting the animal’s throat, putting it on a roaring fire, sprinkling grain, dashing a new skin of wine over the blazing sacrifice.

Now it happens. It has to happen, or when Manoach wakes up from his stupor, he will be a very angry husband. The stranger steps into the flame.

Manoach sobers up. He falls down next to his wife. “We are going to die—die!” he screams. “We saw the Lord.”

Samson scrapes honey out of a swarm of bees into his bare hands, walks along the road, eating, licking it. The hero licking his finger—it's an image that sticks with me. So much honey in his huge palms that he can pour cupfuls into his parents' pots. What is the most likely explanation of the honey in the lion's corpse? The commentator explains, "*The honey is associated with the lion because 'ary' in Arabic means 'honey' as does 'lion.' That's what makes the pun work: 'Out of the fierce, came sweet, out of the feeder, food.'*"

That is a tasty bit of textual analysis. Still I wish to extend the image. It is the bride, the unconverted daughter of the fierce uncircumcised, who is unclean but full of honey. Through the cajoling of his bride the Philistine wedding guests learn the riddle Samson set them. The hero accuses them of threshing with his heifer, tickling his bride. The saying reverberates with the echo of forbidden acts, Leviticus 18, "And thou shalt not lie with any beast, to defile thyself." It is a fable out of Greek Literature, *The Ass of Apuleius*, sexual congress between men and animals. "And he went down and talked with the woman and she pleased him."

"Get her for me, for she pleases me," Samson has commanded his father. Is this also an allusion to honey? Has Samson been at this heifer before? Has he darted among the Philistines, despite their ferocity, and tasted a bit of honey? "And after a while, he returned to take her." The wedding feast seems to come a bit late, an afterthought. Has his father, Manoach, been down to the vineyards of Timnah before his wife and son travel together with him, perhaps at that first brusque command from Samson? They come down again for some arrangement that is never made clear—the less said, the better. Subsequently Samson's "father-in-law" (what "law" is no clearer to us than it was to Manoach) gives his oldest daughter away, the one who has so "well pleased" Samson, to a friend of the hero's. This makes matters worse. The "father-in-law" genially offers a young sister in the older girl's place. Why not? Abraham's nephew, Lot, might have done the same in a similar circumstance. It's not unreasonable to assume, as the "father-in-law" did, that his "son-in-law" was suspicious of his daughter's virtue. Samson stamped off after accusing her of just that, smiting and stripping thirty of her brethren to pay off his pledge. He doesn't stick around for the honey she promised but repairs in anger to his father, Manoach's house.

This nameless vineyard owner of Timnah, Samson's "father-in-law," will be burnt to death with his daughter by an enraged mob of their

misconceive, as Delilah, their agent, misconceived, what the human soul is all about. The text knows that strangers will examine it for the riddle. And so it fends them off with a tale about hair, first shaved, then sprouting.

“Call for Samson, that he may make us sport,” the Philistines shout. “And he made sport before them.” This was foolish—to bring out this child of the angels from the dank lair of his dreams in the prison house. Is he still strong? The women want to know. They press up against him, lift their skirts, search his strength.

He smells the virgins among them, and the scent of honey touches his nostrils. The pillars of the house are carved into the breasts and thighs of girls in their first flight from the arms of men. He touches the breast of one caryatid with his right hand, to the laughter of the crowd. Then he tweaks the nipple on the pillar to the left, as they scream, men, women, a crowd of boys and girls, half-naked themselves. “Look, look,” a crowd of three thousand rocking back and forth in joy at the sight of a blind man nuzzling two caryatids, as if to make love, bending them to him.

“Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the burying place of Manoach, his father.”

It is that last line, a lament, the mourner’s *kaddish* of Manoach’s house, of his brethren, grieving, digging out the body, lifting it to a bier, carrying it up into the hill country from the ocean, that puzzles me, that lost time, which has happened but which we have never seen, dissolved in the honey of the tale, the most difficult part of the riddle to believe, and yet the most matter of fact, perhaps the only important fact in the chronicle, “And he had judged Israel for twenty years.” It is a line repeated from its earlier citation (15:20), with one omission: “in the days of the Philistines.” They are now mercifully absent. We have not a warrior, only the judge, sitting.

We have to go back, because of that ending, that funeral, that sober statement of his judging. Was he a good judge? Did he do what was right, correct, *yoshor*?

Everything speaks against this chief executive of the Children of Israel, yet we are prejudiced. Floozies distract us, flim flam. All this honey, dripping of sweetness, this pleasing, a kind of correctness which is incorrect. He found the woman of the Philistines *yoshroh*, this strange word that teases us with its intimation of delight, for it also stands for “correct,” “straight,”

I don't understand it, but the Philistines did. When they heard that the revenge of Samson, who fired their vineyards and granaries with foxes, had taken place—they blamed it on their own daughter who had changed her bed with him for another's.

They don't say it, but I hear it, in the silence, "He has done what is *yoshor*, right, correct, direct—" and feeling the tingling of that sweetness in the riddle, "what is desirable."

Samson has a great laugh. No one's laugh is louder in the whole of the Bible except the Holy One's—for Samson and he are the supreme lovers of riddles, jokes.

The children of Israel didn't think it funny. They went and tied their hero up, delivered him over. And he—only begged them to leave him to the Philistines. "The jawbone of an ass," in his hands delivered his brethren.

Now the Holy One cleaves a rock for Samson and draws water—and the next we hear of him, Samson is judging Israel—twenty years. The spirit rests in him—but then...

The sweetness—he goes down to Gaza, finds a whore. The text minces no words. He tears up the gates, to elude or to mock the ambush? A playboy, he shoulders them off to Hebron.

Now comes the riddle every school child knows. The girl he loves is no longer faceless. She has a name—one that stings of the old tales told around the Bedouin's fires. Delilah—Lilah, night, and Lillith, queen of devils, curdles in its syllables. This one will entice a riddle out of Samson too.

Now the final riddle is on the march—slouching toward Gaza.

And if, as the critic insists, Samson is Israel, a man who is little better than a pun, in his benighted pursuit of the gentile woman a metaphor of Holy Israel steeped in sin, what of the sin?

"Without sin there is no perfect service," the Rabbis remark. The "evil inclination"—does not Genesis Rabbah praise it? "Evil," my friend, the Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector, cried out, as we spoke in Rio di Janeiro of Kabbalah, of Shabbetai Zvi and Jacob Frank, of the demonic. "Oh, Mark." She shook the circles of weight that fifty years or more had added to her attractive frame, danced in the room, as if circling a campfire with bracelets tinkling on her ankles. Called to me, tossing her hair, "I so want to do *eeevil*." To call the angels, of light or darkness. To taste shame, and to be aware of

Samson's rage and lust, he is a man who waits for women to act, to decide. Like his father, he trusts. Samson discovers his strength through the betrayal of that trust. Is Samson ashamed? Is shame the sign of his greatness?

So at the end another riddle is posed. Samson doesn't tell his parents about the source of the honey but feeds them on it as he will feed all Israel. Samson's strength, his courage, the fruit of his labor, is "unclean," forbidden to Israel as a nation of priests. They all eat, without knowing, "from the jaws of a lion dripping down honey." The Philistine women, the honey of their bodies was but an illusion for Samson, a means to sin, and thence to the spirit. Israel has stood to the side, watching poor Samson wielding his clumsy weapon, withholding help. The dead lion in this story is its hero, who in death pours out sweetness and, pulling down their temple on the Philistines, sustains all Israel. They share his lesser sins but watching him suffer, commit a greater one. Shame comes many generations later.

And the spirit? It, too, rises from the altars of two temples, built and pulled down—but afterwards, long after the story is told.



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